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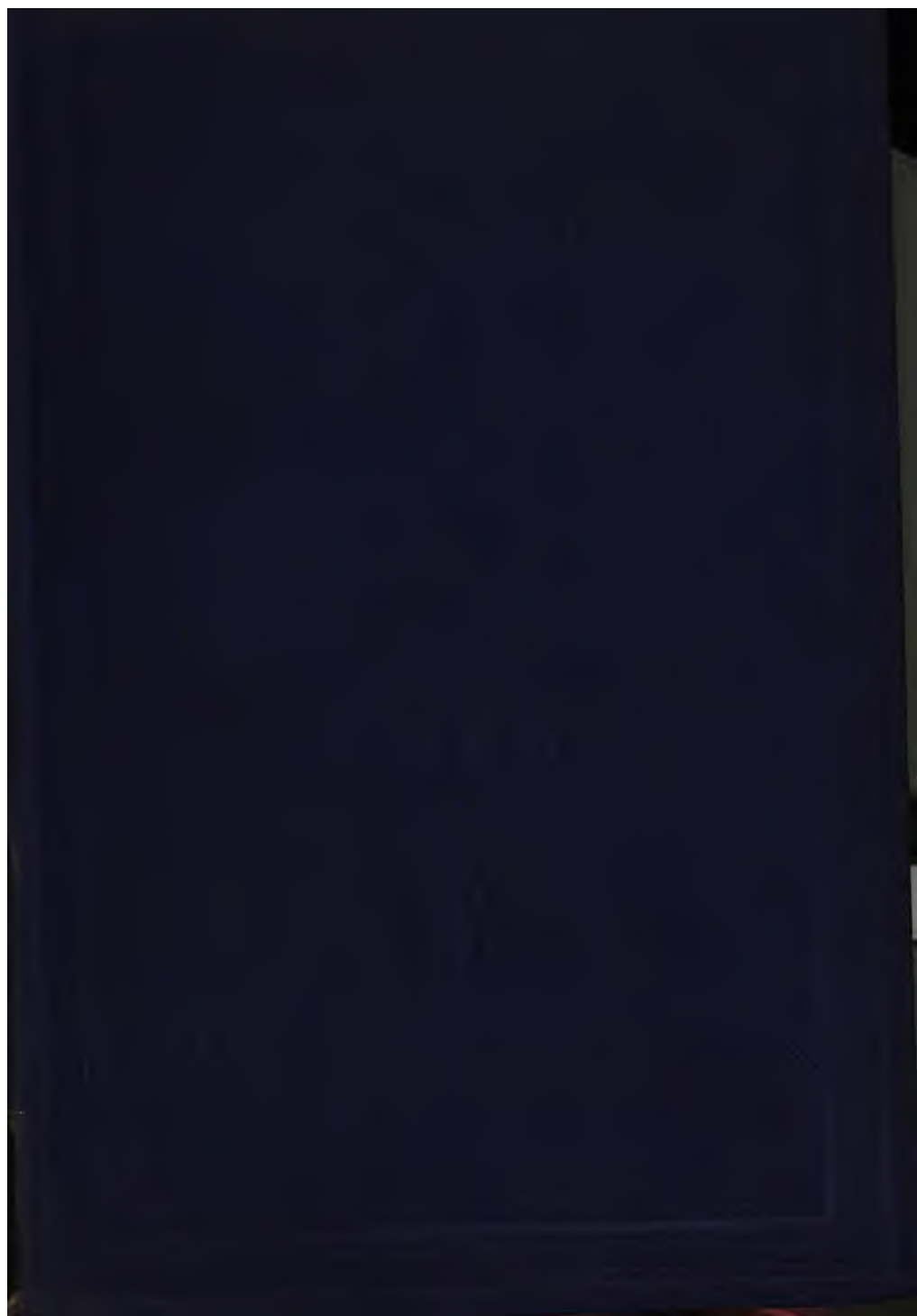
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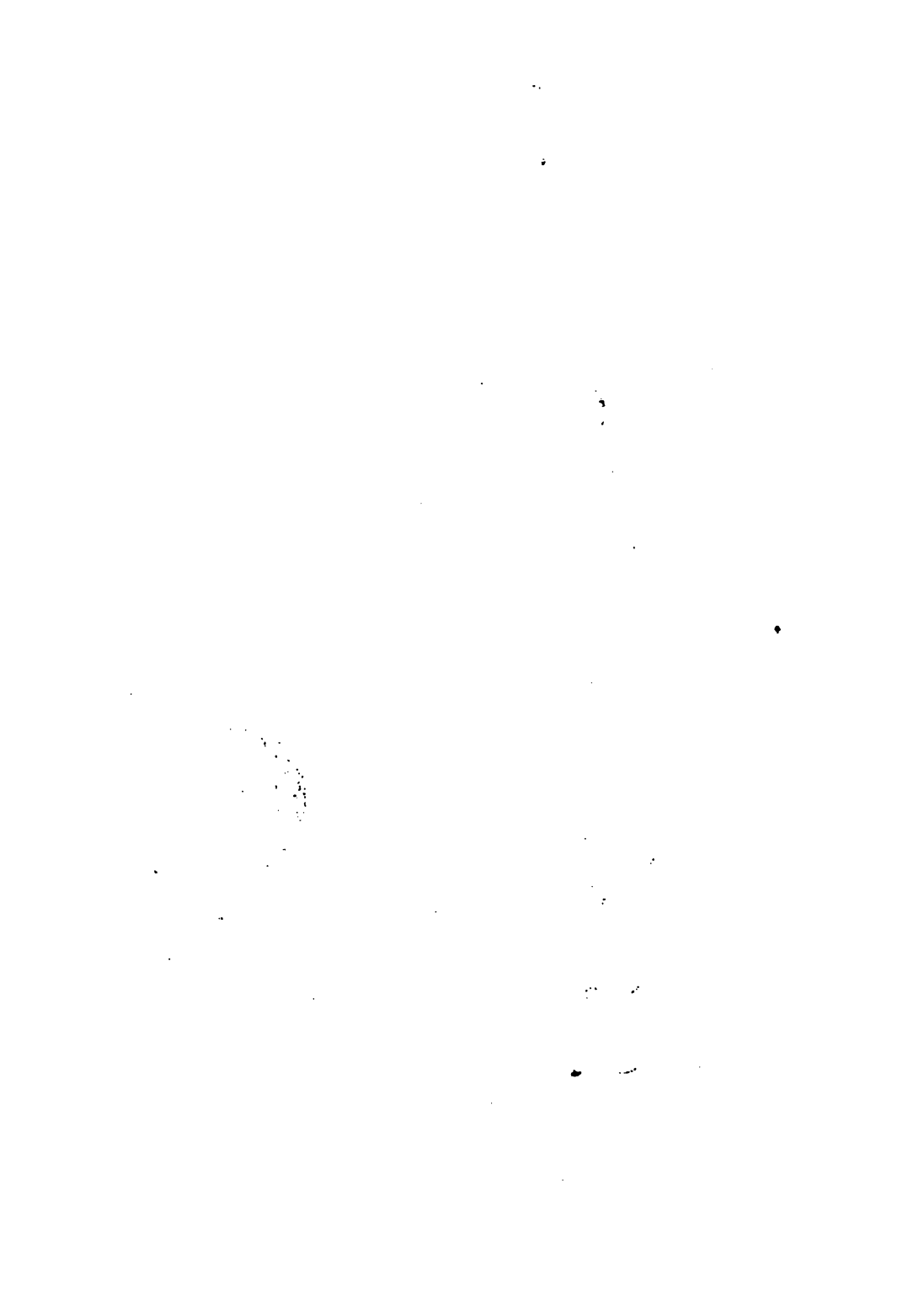
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POOR HUMANITY.

VOL. I.



POOR HUMANITY.

BY THE AUTHOR OF

"NO CHURCH;" "CHRISTIE'S FAITH;"

"MATTIE, A STRAY," ETC.

Nov 61

"Such is humanity."—WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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TO

A DEAR FRIEND,

JOHN KERSHAW,

OF

WILLESDEN.

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POOR HUMANITY.

BOOK I.—NELLA.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

WILTON HEATH.

THERE had been rare racing the week before on Wilton Heath—excellent sport; much money won and lost, an outsider taking away all the honours along with the Wilton Cup, which the owner and backers of the first favourite had made sure of. The company had come and gone, the horses had been despatched to Nottingham and Hunts, where there were more races on the cards, and the heath would have been left to the birds and rabbits, but for one small, solitary caravan which remained there out of place and incongruous, a melancholy spectacle indeed.

Stray horsemen, making short cuts across the heath, wondered at it as it loomed before them; the farmers on their cobs pulled up and rubbed their

eyes as at an unseemly vision to which they were unaccustomed after race time; the tax-gatherer, jolting in his gig along the road that skirted the heath and dipped down to Wilton town, began to consider if there were not a claim to be put in presently; and the postman, rattling by in his red cart night and morning, speculated with the rest of the world as to the meaning of that show-house on the deserted heath—what it wanted there neglecting business at races farther north, who gave permission for it to remain, and whether it were good luck or bad that had arrested the further progress of the showman?

Shut in as it had once been by a host of booths and tents, it was as great a landmark now as Cheops' pyramid, and looked as much deserted. The wind had blown away the debris of the race, the straw from hampers, the pink wrappings round champagne bottles, the fragments of correct cards, the empty fusee-boxes, and all the heterogeneous litter peculiar to courses after races have been won, and vanity fair has departed somewhere else. The rag-pickers and gamins had long since cleared off all that was saleable or eatable, and the Grand Stand seemed scowling now at the one record of last week's fine doings—that mysterious caravan, which held its ground there as though it had given

up business for ever, and retired into private life and country quarters on the breezy common where the race was won.

And yet it did not appear as though prosperity had rendered its proprietors careless as to future profits. The van was old, weather-worn, and dirty, and the poles on which the paintings of its inner attractions had been hung looked like the decayed and splintered masts of a ship that had run aground some years ago, and was left a wreck not worth the trouble of breaking up for salvage.

Still the caravan held its place on Wilton Heath, and those not in the secret began to fancy that it had been deserted by its owners, or that the lessors of the ground had seized the property for rent unpaid, or some evasion of the rules. Those in the secret knew better, and they were three outsiders, with two of whom our story has a little to do in this prologue, and a great deal to do in the future pages, stretching far away from this.

Those in the secret, then, were the parish doctor, the Reverend Theobald Gifford, and his sister Augusta, all well-known folk in the county, people who had their likes and dislikes, were liked and disliked in their turn, and thus were not very different from the rest of the world. They were obtrusive busybodies, the Giffords, it was asserted

by those who objected to the brother and sister ; ferreting out all kinds of things that were no business of theirs, and yet which they made their business, and created friends or enemies in consequence, according to the way in which their overtures were considered by the people whose business it was.

Thus it came to pass that the parish doctor first, and then the incumbent of Wilton, and afterwards the incumbent's sister, became aware that there was a woman sick unto death in Mudgeson's caravan—a woman who had been struck down and ridden over by a restive horse on cup-day, and whom it would be murder to disturb whilst the hard battle for life went on within the show.

She was a woman of whom Mudgeson knew nothing—next to nothing, he added with a reserve, on the one occasion of finding Mudgeson sober and conversational. She had come to them and asked for a job ; they had met her telling fortunes at Hampton Races, and the old 'ooman—it was Mrs. Mudgeson to whom the proprietor referred in this place—had said that was the pusson for their money, and to describe in good langwidge the march of Napoleon Bonyparty over the Halps, in their grand moving and mechanical panorama, with five hundred clock-work figgers that went like life,

and were the wonder of Europe, Asia, Afriker, Ameriker, and the entire Continent. She had been with them three months, Mudgeson added, and he had no fault to find against her, except that she was a miserable, disagreeable, discontented, aggerewating, cross-grained female, who wanted a rise in wages once a month, and was inclined to fret about that, or somethink else, after work was over, instead of taking her gin and water like a Christian.

They did well with her whilst she kept her 'elth, Mudgeson said in conclusion, for she were heloquent, and the public liked her palaver; but when they were building on the summer, and lived on'y by the harvest in the summer time—here Mudgeson pulled the forelock of his hair, for he was addressing the Reverend Theobald Gifford then, who might be as liberal with his money as his Bible texts, for what he knew to the contrary—blest if the blazing jockey didn't ride his blazing horse clean out of the blazing ring over her where she was a-standing—where she hadn't a bit of right to be in bisness hours, mind you—and afore he could stop 'em, the fools, whoever they were, carried her slap up into the carawan, and a doctor came and said it would be death to move her 'arf a mile, and at their peril was it; and so the clock-work army, not to mention the supplementary attractions of a two-headed infant in a

bottle, and a boa-constrictor, had been at a standstill ever since, whilst he had his 'orse, his wife, his child, and hisself to keep, and found it hard work enuf, Gord knows.

When Mudgeson discovered that the Reverend Theobald Gifford had nothing to give away, and was rather disposed to lecture him upon various striking points of his discourse, he went away to Wilton town, and took to drinking in defiance of his own bad luck, turning up occasionally on the heath to abuse Mrs. Mudgeson, and knock down Mrs. Mudgeson for always promulgating to him the bad news that Mrs. Carr was not dead yet, but was just the same, or perhaps a trifle worse.

The Reverend Theobald Gifford was a man who prided himself upon doing his duty, and perhaps unwittingly thanked Heaven that he was not as other men were; and the more unpleasant and irksome his task, the braver was he to face it, and to let it usurp the most prominent place in his mind. The task of talking to this poor stricken woman had fallen to him, and though it was not to his liking, and one which was met by no thanks, and elicited no response, still it had become a part of his duty in his daily round, and his pale, hard face looked down upon the dying woman once a day, and always in the early morning, about an hour after sunrise, and

his clear, metallic, unsympathetic voice read forth a chapter from the Testament, and uttered a prayer or two of which no one took much heed.

For the woman who was sick unto death did not want to die ; on the contrary, clung so passionately, so desperately to the life that was left in her, that the minister's sense of propriety was shocked. There was no reasoning of his that could tone down the despairing look upon her face—there were no words of consolation to be read which could reconcile her for one instant to the thought of leaving a world, which must have been a very stern and pitiless one, to have reduced her thus low. She only wanted life to be happy, she moaned ; not to die like a dog in the corner of that van, with not a friend at her side to be sorry for her.

Had she friends whom she would like to see ? Mr. Gifford asked her ; and she tossed her head wildly on the pillow, and said, No. Was there anything that troubled her mind, and rendered her unhappy at the last ? and the woman would not answer, but compressed her lips, and gazed out of two dark eyes at the speaker. Was there anything that could be done for her in any way—anything that she wished should be done now or *afterwards* ? Yes ; get her another doctor, not that parish hireling, who looked in as a matter of course,

and perhaps did not understand her case. Get her, for the love of Heaven, a skilful man, and give her one more chance to live.

The Reverend Theobald Gifford reasoned with her once again on this anxiety, spoke of a world where all troubles would cease, and her poor, weary heart find rest, if she were penitent and trustful; and the woman begged for further assistance when the voice of the preacher ceased.

“So she goes on, sir,” said Mrs. Mudgeson, as she rocked her baby in her arms, and made an unnecessary noise with the heels of her boots as she swung backwards and forwards in her chair, “as if no one was doing nuffin for her, and everybody was slighting her at every turn. She’s got our house and home, and stopped our business, and druv the guv’nor to the ale-house, and now don’t say as much as thankee.”

“You have been kind—you couldn’t have done more for me in this place; you couldn’t have done less,” she added, perhaps ungratefully, but then the woman was fretful and desolate, and had not found much kindness along with the attention that she had received. She could perceive that she was in everybody’s way; but she wished to linger there, even though there was no hope of her recovery.

She was not more than forty years of age, but

pain and sorrow had made her look an older woman. She was hopeful of getting better, though the shadow of death lurked in the corners of that miserable caravan, and there were not many hours of life left in her.

The Reverend Theobald Gifford went home with a furrow on his brow, and his face even sterner and paler than its wont. The stubborn nature of the woman had perplexed him. Out of kindness, and a long way out of his usual track, had he gone to console that woman, and to read to her soul-cheering words day after day, and with each visit he had found more inflexibility towards his teaching, and more craving for the life which was fading away from her. It was an unnatural position, and new to his experience; for she was very weak now, and should have listened to him patiently, and been intensely grateful for all that he had done for her.

He did not tell the story to his sister Augusta till she asked him if anything had disturbed him, and then, after a little start at the discovery she had made, he told her of the woman who had been run down on Wilton Heath, and was not likely to recover.

This was in the evening, after dinner, when they were sitting at the open window of their drawing-

room, which looked upon the lawn and the spacious grounds beyond appertaining to a house big enough for a bishop; for the Reverend Theobald Gifford, incumbent of Wilton, was a rich man. He had married the widow of an India broker—for her gold, the world, ever uncharitable, had asserted—and she had died after five years' idolatry, leaving him all her money to console him in his great bereavement.

His sister Augusta was his housekeeper and companion then—a pretty girl to many tastes in Wilton, with not a little of that decisiveness of expression on her face which might indicate a proud, stern, or firm woman to the first fancy of an observer; and yet it was a face that was womanly and fair, and unless report belied the Giffords, there were more than one anxious that it should adorn their homes rather than the brother's. But that is beside the question at present. A girl of shrewd perceptions, it was evident, was this incumbent's sister; for Mr. Gifford had scarcely completed his narrative, and had not begun his essay on the stubbornness of the human heart, when she said—

“It must be for the sake of others rather than for herself, that this woman clings tenaciously to life, Theo.”

“I don't see that. If there were anything of that

kind on her mind I believe that she would have told me."

"Not if she has still a hope of recovering from her accident," said his sister, "or a doubt as to your being the right person in whom to confide."

Mr. Gifford gave a little cough at this, and regarded his sister gravely. Could it be possible that any one could doubt his being the fit and proper person to advise, console, or put trust in?—that his sister could think so, or think that that woman on Wilton Heath could think so, for an instant?

Perhaps, with all his goodness, earnestness, and piety, he was not a perfect man, and had his crotchets and his tempers like a few of those worldlings about him whom he pitied very much, for he frowned as he replied, after some minutes' consideration of the question—

"No, it is not likely that she should doubt me, Augusta. I have no end to answer but her lasting welfare, and she should be the first to see that."

"Yes, she should," said Augusta, very thoughtfully also; "but then you belong to a different world to hers, and are not likely to be understood at once."

"I really don't know what you mean, Augusta," answered the incumbent, in an offended tone at last.

"Do you think that I have treated this poor woman otherwise than as a suffering sister?"

"No, you have done your best, I am sure," said Augusta, "therefore you must not look cross at me, as though I fancied that you had done your worst."

"I'm not cross in the least; I felt a little hurt for an instant, but it was momentary," he said. "Of course you cannot imagine that I do not understand the poor and ignorant."

"They are a great mystery—some of them."

"And this poor woman, who wishes for further medical advice, and will not see how hopeless her case is, I understand thoroughly. Hers is a nature to grieve over very much," he said, as he took up his newspaper, which had just arrived from town.

"I should like to see her," said Augusta thoughtfully.

"My dear, that is impossible," replied Mr. Gifford, looking with no small astonishment over his supplement towards her.

"Why is it impossible, Theo?"

"You are not accustomed to a scene like this; it is not fit for a young, gentle, high-born woman."

"I have done my share of district visiting in my time," said his sister, "and have seen suffering enough to steel my high-born nerves somewhat."

"Yes, but this is different, Augusta. This is my especial province."

"I am not quite sure of that."

"I hope you are not going to lead me into one of those objectionable arguments, wherein you never give way, and invariably disturb me," he said, with great solemnity. "I have to prepare my sermon for to-morrow presently, and it is always my aim to do that in as calm a frame of mind as possible. Pray do not let us have any argument to-night."

She respected his look of half entreaty, half command, and contented herself with one more question.

"Further medical advice, the sufferer asks for, doubting the skill of poor old Spinks. Well, has she had it, Theo?"

"My dear, it was useless. No one can doubt that the poor woman is sinking fast."

"Poor woman," echoed Augusta, and then there was silence between them until the brother had glanced through his paper, an act which he performed with great rapidity.

The *Times* laid down, he rose and kissed his sister on the forehead.

"Good-night, Augusta; I shall go from my study to my room to-night. You will look round the house the last thing as usual. Good-night," here-

peated ; then with slow and measured steps the tall man went across the room, and left his sister still sitting by the window in the twilight, thinking very deeply.

The stars were bright above the garden ground, and the room was full of shadow, when Augusta Gifford sprang suddenly to her feet, and looked round her almost fiercely.

“What a shame it seems. Dying alone there on that heath, and no one caring for her !”

The story had left its mark on her mind, and was not to be lightly shaken off ! Augusta Gifford was a girl who thought deeply at times, or a stranger’s misfortunes would not have so seriously affected her.

She was standing at the door of her brother’s study a few minutes afterwards, listening intently, and hesitating whether to break in upon his lucubrations. Theobald was studying in earnest within there ; he wrote his sermon and recited it at the same time in a deep sonorous voice, which would have been somewhat startling to those unacquainted with his peculiar method of composition. To have saved his life the incumbent could not have penned his morrow’s discourse without giving voice to every word which he wrote, and there was no affectation or preliminary rehearsal in the work which he had

set himself. He was thinking aloud, that was all, and the habit had become deeply ingrained in him.

“Dear old fellow! No, I’ll not disturb him and spoil his sermon for him. He will only endeavour to persuade me to give up my idea, or see fifty reasons against it and him which I have never thought of. And as my mind is made up, and I may return before his studies are over, why should I distress him unnecessarily? Surely I know what is right as well as brother Theo.”

She passed into another room on the same floor, put on her bonnet and shawl, and left the house like a woman whose mission was of importance.

CHAPTER THE SECOND.

A HASTY PROMISE.

It was dark night when Miss Gifford started on her journey. A bright clear night, with the stars shining overhead, and the warm air fragrant with the breath of summer. She had made up her mind quickly, and her resolution in this instance was unalterable; she would see the woman who was dying friendless and comfortless in a showman's home on Wilton Heath.

There was another resolution born of this one, which we shall perceive very speedily, and that took her a few yards along the broad country road away from the heath to begin with. Here stood a house of less pretensions than her brother's, lying back from the road, and Augusta opened the swing gate and went along the garden path towards the house. To her surprise there was a carriage and pair before the door, and she inquired of the coachman on the box if Doctor Rivers were going out that evening. The coachman touched his hat, and informed her that Doctor Rivers was going out immediately.

"I am just in time," she said to herself before she was admitted into the ball, and met there no less a personage than the physician himself.

"My dear Augusta," said he, "I am charmed to see you. I hope that—that nothing is the matter though?" he added, with a glance into the face which confronted him.

"Nothing at home," replied the lady. "Are you going far?"

"Merely to fetch Mrs. Rivers from the General's. I have been balked of an excellent dinner owing to a serious hospital case, but shall drop in in time for the coffee, and a rubber at whist. You will forgive me playing at whist late on Saturday night, even if your brother will not?"

"I will forgive you a great many sins, doctor," she answered briskly, "if you will come with me to-night. It is a great favour I am going to ask you, but then you are an old friend."

"Ay, and an old friend of the poor father's too," he said kindly. "What a great favour it must be to make you look at me so seriously as this."

"It will take you away from your favourite rubber."

"Ah, that's hard," he said, shaking his head with mock solemnity. "Step in, and let us talk it over. Perhaps it's nothing very important after all."

"You shall judge for yourself."

They went into the drawing-room together and sat down, Miss Gifford dashing into the subject at once.

"There's a woman dying on Wilton Heath—a poor woman, connected with the strollers in some way—and she is anxious to see another doctor before she gives up all hope of life. Will you come?"

"Concisely put. You are one of the few women of my acquaintance without a plentitude of words. I know the woman you mean."

"Indeed. You have seen her, then?"

"I was at the races when she was knocked down. I examined her, and gave a few directions as to the proper treatment of her at the time. Has she been neglected in any way?"

"Not that I am aware."

"Spinks has been to her regularly?"

"Yes, he has been. And now I want you to go."

"Ahem. Yes, I see you do. But upon my honour, the necessity for this step is not apparent to me. The woman cannot recover. I saw that from the first."

"It might be as well that she should know this too," said Augusta gravely; "and not leave the world doubtful as to the Christian treatment which she has received from it. You are a skilful man,

head of the faculty in this part of the county, and may see a chance for her at the eleventh hour. A woman on the point of death is not likely, as a rule, to think that she is getting better."

"Not as a rule, certainly. But then Spinks——"

"If you were very ill, Doctor Rivers, would you send for Spinks?"

"No, upon my soul, I wouldn't," was the hearty answer.

"Very good. Then we will not leave this woman wholly to him for all the rubbers of whist in the world. We want a wiser and better opinion on the case."

"Ah, my dear, what a diplomatist you are. I have always maintained to Mrs. Rivers that you are the shrewdest and firmest of the Giffords, and there is no beating down one of your crotchets, I'm sure. You have heard my opinion of this case, and still you want me to go?"

"Yes, I do."

"Come along, then. I am your prisoner, although the expedition is of the wild-goose order, and the result to be obtained not worth the fatigue of the journey. What does your brother think of this?"

"I will tell you to-morrow."

"You jade, you are doing this in flat disobedience to his orders."

"No, I am not. He was busy in his study, and I did not like to interrupt him."

"It would have been as well if you had asked his advice before you came away. Steady old Theo likes to know the whys and wherefores of everything, just as his father did. By Jove, he grows more like him every day!"

"Are you ready, doctor?"

"Yes, thank you," said the physician, starting to his feet. "After all, you know the value of time better than I do. Let us make haste. What an extraordinary girl you are, Augusta."

"Do you think so?"

"I wonder whether you will allow your husband a will of his own?"

"When I secure one, I will let you know."

"Or your husband will tell me one day in a burst of confidence, poor miserable henpecked fellow as he will be. Wilton Heath, James."

"Where, sir?" exclaimed the amazed footman, as he held back the carriage door.

"Wilton Heath; going for a little blow with Miss Gifford," was the dry remark, as he assisted Augusta into the carriage.

The footman saluted his master in military style, but looked gravely at him as at a friend much to be respected, but whose mind was giving way.

"Which part of the heath, sir?" asked he.

"Oh—ah, which part? Let me see, which part is it? Why, the part where the penny show is, to be sure. Tell the coachman to make haste, and as we are going up-hill I think we may dispense with your attendance."

"Very well, sir," and then, the directions given, and the door closed, away went Miss Gifford under escort. Doctor Rivers was a pleasant, genial, loquacious companion at all times and seasons, a man much loved in his profession, and one who had earned distinction in it. He was full of gossip and anecdote that night, but much of his eloquence fell upon a mind preoccupied. The lady was thoughtful, for she was unused to these sudden dashes at misery and affliction, and she was not twenty years of age yet. Still she was firm, though the consciousness that she was advancing to much suffering and unhappiness rendered her disinclined for the light speech of her companion, to whom human suffering and unhappiness were things of every day.

The horses toiled up the steep ascent that led from Wilton town to the heights, and finally cantered along the level road above them until the caravan was seen a hundred yards across the turf—a black spot upon the night.

"You will remain here, my dear, for a few

minutes," said the physician; "there is no occasion——"

"Oh yes, there is," said Miss Gifford; "I wish to see the woman, and to speak to her."

"You are considerate," said her friend; "but are you sure that you have not overtasked your strength—or that there is really any necessity for this untimely visit?"

"I am strong enough," she said; "but your second question I am not able to answer at present. If I were a superstitious girl, I should almost fancy that I had been called up here to-night."

"Ah, but you do not believe in calls.

"Not yet," was the reply.

They descended from the carriage, and gazed up at the wooden edifice before them. There was a faint light behind the window near the roof, and from the iron chimney in the centre smoke was slowly issuing forth. The steps leading to the door had been drawn up for the night, and it was evident that Mrs. Mudgeson expected no more visitors. Doctor Rivers raised his gold-headed cane, and tapped at the door. No answer being returned to this, he knocked again somewhat louder, and the window was banged outwards in response, whilst a shrill voice shrieked forth—

"If that's you, Mudgeson, you can go back to the

town and not come ramping and swearing here, and disturbing this poor critter again, who can't last till morning. It's our luck, and can't be helped, to be put all abroad like this, and so be off and sleep yourself sober, for I ain't a-going to have any more of your row. You've waked the child up once—you have."

Mrs. Mudgeson was noisy enough herself for the matter of that, but then people are always blind to their own little infirmities, and soft words never turned away wrath with Mudgeson, but rather invited him to crow over the speaker forthwith.

"My good woman, we wish to see the patient," said the doctor, from below.

There was a pause, and then Mrs. Mudgeson replied tartly—

"Oh, do you. Well, it's a pretty time o' night, I must say, and me just got the child off, and thinking of lying down myself. You're not Mr. Spinks."

"No, Heaven be praised," said the physician in a low tone; then, raising his voice, added, "I am Doctor Rivers, of Wilton Hospital."

"Who's the woman with you?"

"Miss Gifford, a sister of the minister who called here this morning."

There was a second pause, and Mrs. Mudgeson

appeared to be communicating this intelligence to the sufferer within, and leaving the result to her decision.

“ You can come in, Mrs. Carr says ; though what’s the use of all you people trotting in and out, and worriting the dying moments of a woman who’s better let alone, goodness knows. If it had been the Queen of the Injins a-lying in state there couldn’t have been more fuss about her. Here, mind the steps.”

The door was suddenly thrown back, a flight of steps unceremoniously flung down, and then Augusta Gifford and the physician ascended into the caravan, and closed the door behind them.

The atmosphere was stifling on first entrance. There was a small oil lamp upon the table, which gave out a smoke that was thick and heavy, and which hung about the ceiling, as though it loved the place, and was not anxious to escape ; and the fire in the little stove burning in the centre of the room went half-way up the chimney, which had grown hot also, and was giving out a warmth of its own that might have been acceptable in Greenland.

“ Open that window again,” cried out the doctor.

“ It’s gived the child cold a’ready,” muttered the woman, as she reluctantly obeyed the doctor’s direc-

tions. "Them open winders air the death o' children, and I've mine to study, and it's all to me. She," with a jerk of her hand towards the silent figure in the bed, "is on'y a stranger here."

"Why do you want a fire?"

"To make gruel for her, and now she won't touch it," was the sullen answer.

"I am afraid that we have put you out by calling," said Miss Gifford gently; "but having heard the story from my brother, I was anxious to see the sufferer at once."

"Well, there she is," said Mrs. Mudgeson, less ungraciously, "and I'm feared you're just in time."

"Dying—now!" exclaimed the girl in a low voice. "Oh, I hope not!"

"Have you ever seed people who were likely to be fetched at any moment, miss?"

"Yes."

"You are young for such sights," said the woman, with a pitying interest in the new-comer suddenly developing itself; "and them were people related to you possibly. This there is no occasion for, and young folk like you should not run after it. And she is fetched; she changed all on a sudden an hour or so ago."

"Indeed," replied Miss Gifford, with a glance

towards the bed, almost hidden from her by the physician, who was bending over it.

"Who is that speaking?" demanded the woman whom they had come to see. "It is a voice I like."

"I am glad of that," answered Augusta quickly; "for I have ventured to ask if I can be of help to you in any way."

"Oh, to help me back to life and strength—to give me time to wait for her."

"To wait for whom?"

"One I shall never see again," was the answer, "and whom no one can help. Who will be taken away where no hope can come to her ever any more. I shouldn't have cared to die if it had not been for her."

"God will watch over her."

"Ah, that's what your brother would have said if I had told him this morning, as my heart was once inclined to do," she murmured; "but I can't take that consolation, knowing what is round her everywhere—knowing what she is. You may stand back, sir; I have been undeceived to-night, and I guess the little good that any one can do me, now. I am resigned I hope—I'm trying. See, my hand does not shake much with the fear of what's coming!"

She held forth her arm from the bed, and though

it trembled excessively with the weakness of its owner, she did not appear to notice it. Doctor Rivers drew back and looked towards his young companion, who understood all that was in that look, and turned sorrowfully away from it towards the woman lying there. A large-eyed, dark-eyed woman she was at whom Augusta Gifford gazed—a woman who had endured much privation before her accident to have grown grey like that, and to have worn that old, pinched look which illness had not given her, but merely deepened in her dying hours. It was the portrait of one who had suffered much and given way, at which the younger and fairer woman gazed. The minister's sister had mastered the position, young as she was, and was as grave and self-possessed as her brother would have been under similar circumstances. She was glad that her womanly instinct had led her to Wilton Heath that night.

“You will not wait for me, doctor?” said she.

“My dear child, you will not remain,” exclaimed the physician. “Why, what good is to be done now? What will your brother say?”

“He will say that I have done my duty when he knows all,” replied Augusta, “and I think my duty is here with this desolate woman.”

“Ay, I am desolate enough,” said the woman;

"but there is no one who can bring me comfort. You are very kind, madam, but I would advise you to go back with your friend."

"I would prefer to stay."

"But——"

"And I mean to stay," added Miss Gifford, and there was no looking at her and believing that she did not mean what she said.

Doctor Rivers succumbed at once. He was a man not fond of discussion, and he understood Augusta Gifford better than the reader does at present. He took a pinch of snuff, and prepared to depart.

"I may call upon your brother now, and tell him where you are?"

"Yes, if you please. Tell him that I will return in the morning, doctor, and that there is no occasion for him to be uneasy about me."

"You will not walk back. I had better send the carriage for you."

"No, thank you," she said quietly. "Good-night."

"Good-night," he answered. Then he went out of the caravan, and down the steps into his carriage, and Augusta Gifford took her seat nearer to the sick woman, who furtively regarded her.

"Are you tired?—do you wish to sleep?" asked the new nurse.

"No; I shall sleep soundly enough presently," she said, with a strange spasmodic smile.

"I think I'll rest a bit now," said Mrs. Mudgeson, composing herself in a chair by the side of a dilapidated wicker cradle, in which the heir to all the property around them was reposing. "I s'pose there's nothin' else that I can do for you to-night, Mrs. Carr?"

"Nothing, thank you."

"Or for you, miss? Which I'd be very happy to, and nothing wanted afterwards, poor as I am, owing to doing my duty to my fellow-critter here, who's stopped all business, and set Mudgeson drinking like a horse. A better husband nor a father never trod in shoe-leather, when he's sober, but when he's in his cups, my lady, I don't know a wusser brute. It'll come home to him some day though."

What was to come home to the absent and bibulous Mudgeson did not appear, for the proprietress dozed off with her head on one side, and her mouth open to the fullest extent, and Miss Gifford did not attempt to rouse her for further explanations.

The new-comer was interested in the sick woman—strangely interested in her desolate condition, and anxious to do something to relieve her mind before

she passed away from earth. She saw that there was a secret anxiety upon her, and though she hesitated at intruding upon it, still she felt that in these last moments she had a right to speak.

When she looked at her again, she found the great dark eyes still attentively observing her.

"Shall I read to you?" asked Augusta gently.

"Your brother has done all the reading, all the preaching too, I hope," was the reply, less scornfully than wearily. "A good man, who has done his best for me, and has taken more trouble than I was worth to tell me what I knew before."

"Can he tell you too often the great truths?"

"I used to think good people could; perhaps I was wrong. Heaven help me, I have been always wrong, I think."

"And for all the wrong you are truly penitent. There, confess that, and I need not trouble you with any preaching of mine."

"Yes, penitent enough. This is the end of my penitence, madam, and the reward for it, not the beginning of it. I was well and strong when I was as wicked as the rest of them."

"Oh, you must not talk like this, at an hour so late," cried Miss Gifford energetically.

"No, it is not right—I own it; but then I have been a dissatisfied woman for years, and the ruling

passion, you know, as they say on the stage—— But,” stretching her thin hand out, clasping the arm of her listener with a suddenness that startled her, and speaking eagerly and hoarsely, “if you had only known me years ago, you would think this a great reformation in me. Go into Vates Street, White-chapel, some day, and tell the people there how Mary Carr died, and then get them to believe you if you can.”

“Need we speak of the past?”

“You would speak of heaven to me. You are one of the good women who come amongst us, and talk to us as if we were little children, and would do more good if you preached a little less, and understood us a little more. Well, Heaven bless you all for what you try to do.”

“I am not a preacher, I don’t do much good. I am too proud and hard.”

“You,” said Mrs. Carr wonderingly—“and yet there is a look of the brother in your face, I think. You will not mind me saying that I did not like him at first, for he was severe with me; but there is a something in you which leads me on to—to—tell you all that weighs me down.”

“You may trust me to help you.”

“Oh, madam, if I could trust you, as an angel sent here at the eleventh hour to help the other one!”

"What other one? I do not understand."

Mrs. Carr dropped her voice still lower, as though fearful that Mrs. Mudgeson might be feigning sleep, and said—

"My daughter. She was coming to me—she promised to come to me, and never go near them again, to share my life rather than theirs, and now I am going away, and she is lost."

"Where is she? Cannot I write to her? Cannot I do something?"

"A clever girl, and they know it. She will return to them again."

"Who are these people?"

"Oh, no matter. Don't speak of them, don't distract my thoughts," said the woman, with increasing excitement. "I am thinking of my girl, and," pressing her hands suddenly to her chest, as though an arrow had struck her there, "I haven't time to think of everything. Let me see," as one thin hand wandered to her temples, "did you not say that you would write to her?"

"I will write to her with pleasure. What shall I say?"

"No—no, you must not write, she may not be able to read yet. When I was in prison—don't start!—she ran wild with those wretches, and they taught her nothing but evil. That was the begin-

ning of it, and I was innocent then, and suffered for somebody else, like the weak, wild play-actress that I was. Ah," with a heavy quivering sigh, "but that is a long story."

She seemed to have become suddenly very weak; her voice had grown fainter, and there was a difficulty in hearing all that she said, she spoke so fast and with such great excitement.

"Where is your daughter?" asked Miss Gifford, who was growing anxious, and saw the change in her.

"My girl? At Gray—Grayling's Reformatory, near Wandsworth. She was too young for a long sentence, and they put her there—took her away from them and me, and—and there you will find her, growing with every day—a better girl, I hope—I pray."

She said this doubtfully, as though before her there loomed a nature which only she could understand, and which she feared might break away at any moment from the light, and steal back into the darkness as to a something that it could not live without.

"I will see her."

"She will be out in two more years; tell her to learn in that time all she can, please. Tell her—oh, please tell her about me; how sorry I have been

about her—how hopeful for her lately, trying myself to be wor—worthy of her when she came out, knowing good from evil, and trusting in me once again, as I—would—trust—in her. Oh, my poor Nella, whom I shall never see again. What—will—become—of—her ? ”

An impulse natural in that hour to a girl whose heart was touched by a mother's bitter wailing, led Augusta Gifford to say quickly—

“ Leave her to me.”

“ To you ! ” and her eyes distended with surprise before the face changed again, and the shadow stole over it that betokened the oncoming night.

There were only a few more grains of sand to filter through the glass, and she was dying very peacefully and silently, when the woman who had nursed her all the week through opened her eyes and glared across the room.

“ Is she going ? ” she asked.

“ Yes.”

“ I thought so ; something turned me cold and woke me up like an orful draught through all the cracks at wunst.”

She rose, and came across to the bedside.

“ She seems restless now a bit,” said Mrs. Mudge-son, “ as if she'd something more to tell you. What is it, Mrs. Carr ? ”

"Hush," said the younger woman, bending down her ear to lips that moved, but whence no sound was to issue forth again. There was a feeble effort to move the hand; Miss Gifford saw it, and took the wasted fingers within her own, fancying that they closed upon her as if in gratitude for all that she had promised, and thus the wasted life of one of society's offshoots drifted from this world.

"Mudgeson will be very glad to hear this," said the hostess, "and I can't say that I'm sorry it's all over. It's wot we must all come to, even to little Billy there, who's slept like a lamb, as if he knowed it wasn't right just now to bust hisself with rage about his double tooth. Poor dear," looking back upon the still figure in the bed, at the side of which a young, fair woman knelt and prayed, "I wish that I hadn't been so fractious with you now; I wish—— Hollo, hark at that, please."

A pause succeeded; the younger woman raised her head to listen. Some one without knocked hastily upon the panels of the door, and a girl's voice called forth, "Mother."

CHAPTER THE THIRD.

THE REV. THEOBALD GIFFORD IS VERY MUCH ANNOYED.

THE incumbent of Wilton continued the composition of his sermon long after his sister had left the house on her strange errand. Shut up in his study, and absorbed in his occupation, he took no heed of time until the last page of his manuscript was written. This was, for Wilton folk, at a late hour of the night—close upon midnight—when few were stirring in the old town from which the house stood apart, and the servants had long since gone to their rooms, leaving a neat little silver candlestick on a bracket outside the study door for the master.

Theobald Gifford was later than usual ; but then the subject of to-morrow's sermon had interested him more than usual, and he had written slowly and carefully, and recited aloud some portions of his manuscript three or four times, to make sure that the due effect was not missing in his discourse. He was anxious to create an impression in the pulpit to-morrow ; and he had worked hard for it, setting aside that deep analytical style which was more to

his taste, and for which he was distinguished. He had an un-English horror of horse-racing, the turf speculations that arose therefrom, and the temptations which beset the weak-minded on all sides and in every shape; and he was anxious to inveigh against the proceedings of last week with all the power at his command; to call attention to the many absent from his church on the Sunday immediately succeeding the races, and the general sleepiness and apathy which pervaded those members of his flock who were in their pews, and who he knew had not cared to attend to his quiet hints of seven days before, but had been on Wilton Heath with those more profane and ungodly than themselves. He had a moral to deduce—also a striking picture to paint; and the story of the woman dying on Wilton Heath, he thought, would not be out of place, and in his hands would be the means of arousing the feelings of his congregation.

Here was a wasted life to dwell upon; here was a sad career meeting with a sudden, awful termination; and though he would only dwell lightly upon it, and not pervert the moral to be extracted from the circumstance, still he felt that he should stir the hearts of his listeners, and set them thinking of more serious matters than the winner of that year's Wilton Cup, and the money lost or won upon it.

"There," he said, with a sigh of relief, as he dropped his pen into its place, and leaned back in his study chair, "I have eased my mind, and have not shrunk from hard truths. Why should I shrink from them to please the worldly ears of any man?"

He frowned at the idea of shrinking from any one in his Master's cause, and then he smoothed the wrinkles away from his high forehead, and sat for a few moments grave and thoughtful.

With the full light of the oil-lamp upon him, he sat as for his portrait, and a few words will sketch him for us. A very tall man, it has been already observed, was the Reverend Theobald Gifford—a spare man, it may now be added, with a narrow chest, which at one time, it was thought, presaged consumption, or a long list of ailments to which narrow-chested folk are prone. A man without an atom of colour in his face, which, however, was not an unhealthy face to look at, but simply pale and study-worn. The features were too sharp, perhaps, to say that Mr. Gifford was a good-looking man, but they were not irregular, and were what his friends unanimously called "aristocratic;" though what that exactly means is not easy to define, for all our hazy notions of the real patrician "grit." Not an old man was the incumbent of Wilton, scarcely middle-aged—unless three-and-thirty may be con-

sidered to verge thereon—but looking older than his years, owing to a mass of wavy hair, which study of theology, grief for his wife, or supreme contempt for the marvellous powers of “Boshington’s Reviver,” had turned grey before its time.

This was Mr. Gifford of Wilton on the day our story opens—a man much respected, whose crotchets, for he had a few, even gained him respect for his persistence in them, believing how right he was, and how wrong was the rest of the world that differed from him; a man feared a little by those weak folk whose faults he took the trouble to point out occasionally, and disliked by a few whom he would never let alone, because they never came to church, and were always in open rebellion against religion, law, and decency, and lived in back slums behind the market-place.

Mr. Gifford collected the leaves of his sermon together, fastened them neatly with a needle and thread, closed his desk and locked it, and then took a turn up and down his room, for the sake of exercise, before passing from his study.

When he was outside his room, he began walking on tiptoe, like a thoughtful and careful man as he was, towards a door at the opposite end of the landing-place.

It was a broad landing-place, with many doors

opening thereon—for the house was a wide one, and had several rooms upon each floor—and as Mr. Gifford walked towards his chamber, he glanced into one room in particular, the door of which was wide open as he passed.

“Augusta never intended to leave her door open like that,” he muttered to himself. “It has fallen back, I suppose. Perhaps I had better shut it.”

He returned a few steps, and as he stood on the little wool mat outside, it struck him suddenly that the room was empty.

“Down-stairs still? Surely, she must have fallen asleep in the drawing-room,” he soliloquized, when he had convinced himself of the fact. “I will wake her at once.”

He went down-stairs after this, looked into the drawing and dining rooms, examined carefully other rooms upon the same floor, even went into the servants’ hall, where he made the discovery that his servants had had a hot supper of fowls and ham, and drank two bottles of wine with it. This was also an extraordinary circumstance, and set the butler in a sinister light, though his attention at morning prayers had been a something remarkable; and Mr. Gifford considered this matter along with the fact that his sister Augusta was nowhere to be found.

He went back to the drawing-room—not excited by these matters, for it took a great deal to excite Mr. Gifford, but puzzled by them both, and inclined to connect one with the other, and to believe that Augusta had also made the discovery of a hot supper down-stairs, and was lecturing the domestics somewhere. But the house being very still and dark, he was dismissing that idea, when he heard some one walking along the gravel-drive towards his house, and blowing very much as he advanced.

Mr. Gifford opened the door before the arrival of this late visitor, set down his candlestick, and went at once to meet the coming man.

“What do you want, at this time of night?” he asked imperiously.

“Well, that’s a pretty salutation for a friend, Theobald.”

“Doctor Rivers! I hope nothing is the matter?”

“Oh, no; only I promised your sister I would give you a look in, and tell you where she is.”

“Is she not at home, then?” was the quiet question put here.

“You have not found that out yet? I am glad of that. I was afraid that my long—long talk with the General would have exploded the whole thing before I could explain. I had no idea it was so late; but when one gets playing—I should say,

talking about politics, the time runs away very rapidly."

"Where is Augusta, doctor?"

"Oh, she has gone to see that poor woman on the heath. It was a fancy of hers to see her, and you know, when she takes an idea into her head, she is not unlike her brother Theo."

Theobald Gifford did not see the joke, but then the night was dark, and the candle was flaring away in the draught behind him. He stared over the shoulder of his friend for a moment or two, as though extremely interested in the lamps of Doctor Rivers's carriage in the distance.

"What time did she go?"

"Some hours since. I took her there myself. My dear boy, I am afraid that you are annoyed at this."

"I am very much annoyed," was the reply.

He did not look annoyed—indeed, it was doubtful if his features had changed from the first moment of his meeting with the physician; but he was none the less annoyed for that, and he was a man who prided himself in not keeping the truth back. He was annoyed in a great degree, and he confessed as much. His sister had intimated that evening that she did not think he had treated the dying woman with becoming gentleness, and now she had gone to

see for herself, to try one of her own eccentric ideas, methodless and impulsive, upon the stubborn sufferer on Wilton Heath. He would have given his permission for her to go, if she had asked for it—he would have thrown no obstacle in her way, had she been anxious to see the woman; but it suggested itself to him very strongly that he might have been consulted on this step, more especially as it was an eccentric one, and required a little consideration before it was made. He did not give Augusta credit for a wish not to intrude upon his studies, and disarrange his conceptions. That did not strike him at the time; and he was a man, for all his outward coolness, who jumped at conclusions swiftly and silently, and was difficult to move from the first position he took up.

“I don’t see anything to be annoyed about,” said Doctor Rivers, with whom Augusta Gifford was doubtless a favourite. “The girl was touched by your eloquent description, and went to see if she could be of any use. She took me with her, too, to make quite sure that there was not a chance of the woman’s recovery.”

“She must have had the idea that everybody was neglecting the woman,” said Mr. Gifford; “but she always was singular in her ways, and a little too quick in her actions.”

"You don't blame her for going?"

"No—no; I don't blame her for that," he replied; "the motive was good, of course, for she is a good girl. How will she get back from the heath?"

"She intends to stay there till the morning."

"That is very imprudent. What does she know of the people by whom the woman is surrounded? The man who owns the van is an abusive fellow, and there are bad characters lurking about still, I have no doubt."

"I offered to send the carriage back for her," said the doctor, "but she would not accept my offer."

"I will go myself, thank you."

"But your horse and chaise——"

"I intend to walk. You forget that it is Sunday morning now."

"I beg pardon, so I do. I am afraid that we have been keeping it up a little too late at old Whitlock's."

"I don't agree with evening parties on a Saturday night, myself," was the cold answer, and then Mr. Gifford thanked his friend for calling upon him, bade him good-night in the same tone of voice, and turned back towards his house.

A few minutes afterwards, when Doctor Rivers

had gone home, and one servant in the house had been apprised of the fact that the master was going out, Mr. Gifford, with a light overcoat buttoned to the chin, and a stout walking-cane—that had been his father's before him—in his hand, for protection or company's sake, shut the street-door behind him, and walked swiftly along the carriage-drive into the high road.

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

A WANDERER.

MR. GIFFORD was still very much annoyed, although he would have scarcely owned the fact to himself now. He was annoyed the more because his sister's rash step had necessitated in him an objectionable walk at a still more objectionable hour. He had never admired that journey up the hill to the heath, and to attempt it once more at half-past twelve in the morning of a Sabbath day was not at all to his mind.

Still he was anxious about his sister; he was not quite certain of the character of the Mudgesons. It was only that morning that Mudgeson himself, smelling horribly of beer, had met him in the High Street, and wanted to shake hands with him; and he did not know how many nomads might be left upon the heath after last week's racing. His sister did strange things at times, and, growing tired of caravan life, or even so far paying him a compliment as to think that he might be uneasy about her, it

was probable that she would start for home before daylight, and see no danger in the step she took.

There were few people abroad that night. A mounted patrol trotted by him in the lanes leading towards Wilton Hill, and touched his hat to him as to a figure that he recognised; one man slouching towards town asked him for a light; and then he seemed to have the dark country all to himself, until he reached a stile which led to a footpath across two cornfields, and was a short cut for pedestrians to the heath, as the farmer who owned the wheat had discovered to his cost last week, when the Wilton folk trampled ruthlessly on his property in their eagerness to reach and leave the scene of action.

Mr. Gifford reflected for an instant upon the advisability of taking this narrow path, and then, with a sneer at his own hesitation, strode across the stile and continued his way. He had nearly crossed the first field, when it struck him that if Augusta should return home before daylight, she would take the high road as a matter of course, and that then he should miss her after all. He believed that she would do this in preference to remaining till the morning, and he hesitated once more to consider this new feature of the case; and whilst thus in grave deliberation with himself, a suspicious rustling

amongst the corn caused the reverend gentleman to peer before him cautiously.

It was not the wind stirring then, for the air was oppressive that night, and the heavy heads of corn hung motionless upon their stalks, a forest of sleeping wheat. It was something lurking near him, and Mr. Gifford prepared for his defence, and clutched his stick more firmly in his hand in consequence. He had not a doubt that some miserable wretch, with whom crime was a trade, would plunge from his hiding-place towards him in an instant, and though his heart beat faster, he was confident in his own strength to meet any single man who might oppose him. But no one dashed forth ; the rustling suddenly ceased, and then as suddenly commenced again, and was accompanied this time by a heavy sigh.

“Some one ill,” thought Mr. Gifford, and then he pushed his way through the corn towards the place whence the sound issued, and where the corn was swaying, and found the “some one” sleeping there.

By her dark dress, it was a girl or woman, lying upon her face, which was supported by her folded arms, with a mass of hair streaming over her shoulders, and the bonnet which should have covered it crushed and damaged at her side—one whose dress was torn

in many places, he could see, by the faint starlight that fell on her in her wild nest amongst the wheat.

"This is not a fit place for you, girl," he said, touching her lightly on the shoulder with his stick ; "you had better get up and resume your journey."

He had not completed his words when the girl sprang to her feet, catching at her bonnet in her upward course, and then backing away from him.

"You'd better leave me alone, I can tell you. I've a big knife in my pocket that takes care of me."

"I merely wish to advise you not to sleep in the open air like this. I am the minister of Saint James's Church, Wilton."

"The minister. Oh, are you ?" said the girl, with a shudder that the darkness could not hide.

"Do you know me ?"

"No," was the sullen answer ; "never seen you afore."

"Where do you live ?"

"What's that to you ?" was the uncivil rejoinder.

Standing up from the wheat, the Reverend Theobald Gifford could form a better estimate of the strange specimen of human nature that he had startled from its lair ; he could see that she was a tall, bony girl, whose eyes seemed preternaturally

large with fright or suspicion, and did not flinch away from him. She kept both her hands behind her, one of which held her bonnet by the strings, and the other clutched something in defence that proved to be the big knife of which she had warned him. They stood looking at each other for awhile after this sharp fire of questions had been exchanged, and then the girl's closer observation of the man assured her of her safety, for the knife was snapped to suddenly, and dropped to the depths of a pocket in her dress.

"I'm not afeard of you—afraid of you," she corrected, as though some reminiscence of better teaching suggested a more correct pronunciation. "I see you're right now—only you might have let me be."

"It was not a safe place for a girl like you to sleep."

"I'm safe enough," she answered, in the same abrupt way which had already characterised her. "I know what I am about."

"Why did you not go into the town, having approached it so closely?"

"I am coming away from it."

"Indeed; where do you live then?"

Mr. Gifford was persistent in his inquiries, and the rude rejoinder of a few minutes since did not

deter him from putting this leading question to her. He was a county magistrate also, and therefore had a little experience in cross-examination of many a wild character.

The girl did not reply readily on this occasion. She thought for an instant concerning the nature of her answer, and then said slowly—

“What do you want to know for?”

“I may be able to direct you.”

“I would rather stop here till morning,” she replied. “I am dead beat, and don’t care to walk agin—again.”

“How far have you walked?”

“Hard on twenty miles.”

“Making for——” and the incumbent paused for her to add the name of the place to which she was advancing. He was a man who would have that question answered.

“For the races.”

“They were over last week.”

“These were, I know that, and blessed sorry I am for it. Well, then, there’s Nottenhum races on Monday.”

“You cannot reach Nottingham by Monday, child.”

“I’m not so sure of it.”

“Whom do you want to find at the races?”

“Mother.”

There was a curious change in the harsh voice as that word was uttered—a touch almost of pathos in it that spoke of a new feeling in the heart of the wanderer.

“How is it that you and your mother have become separated?”

The voice changed again, and the old hoarse tones came back.

“What’s the use of your worriting me like this?” she cried angrily. “I don’t come and wake you up with a cut of a stick, or ask where you are going to. Why can’t you let me alone? I like to be alone, and it suits me.”

“Yes, but it is not right.”

“If you have any money to give away on a gal begging her way across the country, give it like a genelman and I’ll say thankee for it,” she said sharply. “I want lots o’ money to keep me moving along these hot, dry roads; but,” with a sharp twist away from him, “I don’t want talk—I have had enough of that these last four years to last me all my life.”

Mr. Gifford was interested in this outspoken girl, in her self-possession, independence, and misery. He did not take the hint concerning the money, but he did not like the idea of leaving her to subside

into that strange lair again, and he made one more effort to induce her to leave it.

"I am going across Wilton Heath a little way, and can direct you thence to the road which leads to Nottingham."

"Will you?" she said; then, after reflecting on this proposition for an instant or two, she put on her bent bonnet, strode out of the corn, and placed herself at his side.

"Let's get on, then. What's the good o' sleep to me? I've nearly learnt to do without it."

They moved on through the cornfield, crossed the stile into a second field of wheat, larger than the first, the incumbent leading the way, the girl following him slowly, and limping a little in her gait.

"You are footsore?" said Mr. Gifford, who appeared to notice everything.

"Oh, that's nothing."

Half-way across the second field in silence, the clergyman beginning to think of his sister again, the girl behind him of her mother. She had expressed an objection to too much talk, and oddly enough, in a man who was not in the habit of respecting other people's objections, Mr. Gifford did not harass her with further questioning. He was surprised at last by her turning the tables upon him, as though she had become curious in her turn.

"And where are you a-going to?" was the sudden question put to him.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't make you out. At this time of night it's on'y people like me, or genelmen like you who've been drinking late, that keeps a-moving."

"You are observant."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to see a sick woman, and to fetch a sister home who is with her."

"Oh, you've a sister who goes out nussing, then?"

"It looks like it," said Mr. Gifford drily; then he crossed the stile, and walked on up the hill that began here, and his companion followed him.

"I knew a woman who went out nussing once," said the girl, taking her place by Mr. Gifford's side now that the broader space allowed, "and a tidy thing she made of it; but then it was in London, where there's allers—always, I should say—lots of people who want nussing."

"You have come from London, then?"

"Yes, thereabouts, on Shanks's pony. You know what that means?"

"No, I do not. What kind of pony is it—what have you done with it?"

The girl gave the oddest kind of laugh at this that Mr. Gifford had ever heard in his life—a

sepulchral croak, intermixed with an effervescent gurgling that suggested an incipient stage of suffocation.

"It's walking, of course. I thought everybody knew what that meant, and to think you've lived all these years and never heard on it. Well, I've been on that pony for the last three weeks, from fair to fair, from race to race, allers—always, I should say—just missing mother in the most aggerawating manner. It's very odd, how I have managed just to miss her every time: she giving up the races that I got in time for, and passing on to the next, which I couldn't fetch up to. Just gone, they say, and I want to see her,—oh, so bad!"

"Have you been long away from your mother?"

The answer came abruptly, and sounded strangely after the previous exhibition of loquacity.

"Yes," was the harsh reply.

"You get your living in this wandering manner, like your mother, perhaps?"

"No."

"How is it that you and your mother are separated?"

Yes, the Reverend Theobald Gifford clung to his questions. It was remarkable how he veered round to them again, if in his opinion they had not been satisfactorily replied to. The question had been put

before and evaded, but he felt no scruples in once again bringing it into the foreground, notwithstanding that the girl's communicativeness had vanished, and the old reticence re-asserted itself.

"I've been to school," she said at last.

"That was thoughtful of your mother. What school?"

"Boarding-school."

Mr. Gifford looked down upon her in mild surprise, and would have put further questions to her had she not turned the conversation with an adroitness for which he was unprepared.

"What is the matter with the woman that your sister nusses, sir, that she should want to see you at this time of night? People who are going to die want to see the minister sometimes, I've read."

"I have not been sent for. I am going to fetch my sister home."

"Ah, she's not used to my style of walking about. After all, it's best. I like it. There's no one to care for, or to blow you up, or scold you, or lock you up in dark rooms, and tell the Board about your goings on, and never, never let you rest. I shall be all my life on the tramp now with mother, and get my living as well as the rest of 'em. I shall be as happy as the day is long, sir."

"You do not see the temptations which beset you

in a career of which you speak so sanguinely," said Mr. Gifford, seizing the opportunity to improve the occasion; "the horror of that life, and where it will surely lead you. You should strive after something better and purer, child, and in the striving for it, you will infallibly obtain it."

Again the sullen mood rose to the surface; this time in its most forbidding form. This was being preached at, and the wild nature resisted it at once. She had not fled from preaching to meet it again in this shape.

"I don't want to be talked to," she muttered.

"You should never seek to escape advice, that may be profitable to you here and hereafter."

"I don't want it—I won't have it," she cried.

"It will—"

"It will drive me mad," exclaimed the girl, turning upon him with a fierceness for which he was unprepared; "for you lot," she added disparagingly, "are all so hard. You don't make us out, any more than we make you."

"Oh, yes, we do."

"And if you're coming that dodge here," she added resolutely, "I'm off over the hill yonder; and so good-night to you."

"Stay; there's a wood, and you will go a long way out of your road. What can make a girl

so young as you are so stubborn? What is your age?"

This seemed like returning to a better topic, and she answered him—

"Fourteen."

"Only fourteen. Why, there is time for great moral improvement with you. What is your mother?"

"I don't know what you call her. I know that she likes me, and so I go to her instead of to the rest of 'em, who would be glad to have me back again, fast enough. She's with the show-people, and none the worse for that, sir."

A sudden suspicion crossed the mind of Mr. Gifford. Was this girl the daughter of the woman who was lying ill in a caravan on Wilton Heath? Was it possible that this girl was the cause of the mother's uneasiness and unhappiness; and that it was for her the dying woman clung to life tenaciously? He was touched a little at the position, though he was a man whose feelings were difficult to arouse, and he felt that he might soften the shock of the discovery and disappointment when he was convinced of the truth of his conjecture. She was a poor girl—one of the class that he visited, and that it was his duty to visit, however unpleasant it might be to his refined taste, and however little

sympathy he had with it at heart; but he felt moved at the thought of the daughter advancing, full of hope in her new life, to the side of that mother whose new life beyond this one was advancing so rapidly. Let him reflect for a while as to the best method of procedure as they toiled up the hill together.

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

PREPARING HER FOR THE WORST.

THERE was not much breath left for conversation during the ascent of the steepest part of Wilton Hill; taking the short cut across the fields exposed the pedestrian to a steeper bit of ground than the carriage-road a quarter of a mile to the right, and it was this ascent which had rather disturbed the equanimity of Mr. Gifford lately, and made him arrive at Mudgeson's show hot, tired, and cross with his journey. Though he kept a horse and chaise, he never employed them on service of this character, and would as soon have thought of riding into church and along the aisle to the front of his reading-desk: those luxuries were for after-business hours, and for after-dinner rides with his sister Augusta, now that there was no wife left him to drive out with.

He and his strange companion went up the dark hillside together, and as he lost a great deal of his breath, and a pain in his side came on, which was always annoying and vexatious to him, he thought

of the best plan to break the news to the girl who plodded on with him. After all, a poor creature, with no very refined feelings, and one who was not likely to be deeply affected by the revelation. Those moving in a lower sphere of life were always unimpressible and almost callous, he was disposed to think; contact with innumerable troubles at every turn of their career, allied to the ignorance which was in their midst, lowering and brutalising them, necessarily blunted the edge of those finer feelings which such as he and his laid claim to. He had simply to state the truth quietly and gently—say a few kind words of consolation if they were needed, and then an end to it.

The top of the hill was reached at last, and they stood on the margin of the broad heath together, panting for their breath. The first remark of the girl was certainly indicative of the want of that refinement which the incumbent of Wilton innately admired.

“That’s a tightener,” she exclaimed.

“It is a steep ascent,” he said gravely, “and one that I do not seem to get accustomed to, though I have come every morning during the last week.”

“She must be very fond of you to want you to come so often.”

“I have not implied that she is fond of me—on

the contrary, there are truths to tell her to which she, poor thing, objects, as though they were mine, and not from the Eternal lips which first pronounced them."

He spoke more seriously, and the girl became restless once more.

"How far is it across this heath to the road you told me of?" she asked quickly.

"A mile and a half, perhaps."

She asked a few more questions hastily and irrelevantly, as if to turn aside the sermon which had more than once been threatening her, she thought; then she was met by a question of her companion's.

"What is your name?"

"Nella."

"Nella?" repeated Mr. Gifford. "Does that stand for Ellen?"

"Eleanor, I think it is; I hardly know. She allers—always—said Nella, and so I stick to it. I've forgot the other one almost."

"Nella what?"

He could see her frown, dark as it was, and her lips compress themselves together tightly.

He repeated his question as a matter of rule, and she said—

"Never mind."

"But I wish to know."

"Don't ask me, for I shan't tell you."

"Is it Nella Carr?"

The girl bounded several steps away from him, and then glared at him in her great astonishment.

"How—how did you guess that?" she exclaimed.

"I will tell you as we go on together."

"I am not coming farther," she said doggedly;
"I turn off here."

"But that does not lead to the road of which I told you."

"It will do for me. Good-night."

"Stay one moment. Our roads lie together, child, and you will think so also when I have fully explained to you."

"I don't want no explanation—I don't want no more talking to you."

"For a few moments," he almost entreated as she turned to go away again.

"You'll not try to stop me, then?"

"No."

"Honour bright? I take you at your word, old gentleman," she said, returning to his side; "for I don't suppose you'd be hard on a gal like me, whatever I'd done, and after you'd said you wouldn't. This way?"

"Yes."

"However did you find me out, sir?" she asked.

"You aint one of the old fellows that sit round the green baize table once a month, and has up the wust of us to tell us that we're naughty gals, and must go in for bread and water to keep our sperrits down—I think I know all their faces well enough. Why, I was actiwallly—actually, I should say—dreaming of them in the corn when you waked me up."

Mr. Gifford was led away upon another track by this.

"Where have you come from, then?"

"Look here, sir—never mind just now. How did you know my name was Nella Carr? They haven't printed it anywhere about me, have they, and I've not seen it?"

"There is a poor woman named Carr staying at a caravan which has remained on this heath since race week, and I fancy—I am not sure—that you are her daughter."

"Oh, I hope it is. Where's the caravan? I think it must be."

"But this Mrs. Carr of whom I speak has been fairly educated, and should have been able to teach you."

"That's her, sir; that's her," cried Nella, clapping her hands. "She never had a chance of teaching me. They took me away from her, and did not let her know where I had got to; and it was not till I

was put in the Refo—— Is it Mudgeson's Moving Panorammer, sir? Please tell me that?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then I have found her. Oh, I am glad that you woke me up, and brought me along here. I just am pleased to see you, for I should have walked slap by it, and gone on I don't know where, sir, and she behind me all the way. Do you know, mister, that they used to frighten me about my mother, till I hated her very name; but when she came to see me in the—place where I was at school, I knew that it was all gammon. And now," she added proudly, "I am going to live with her, and be respectable."

Mr. Gifford felt another twinge at his heart. He scarcely knew how to dash down suddenly the girl's great joy, and yet they were not three hundred yards from Mudgeson's caravan.

"You must not excite your mother too much at present," he said at last, "for she is ill."

"You don't say so?"

"I may say that she is very ill."

"That's why Mudgeson's staying on the heath now," said Nella; "yes, that's it. She'll get better when she catches sight of me—you see if she don't. You only wait till I say, 'Mother, here I am—on your side, not the others,' and see how she'll pick up her strength."

"Yes, but I would not be too sanguine."

"She'll be cross at fust, because I have come away before my time; but lor, she'll only purtend to be cross, and it'll be all over in a minute."

"You must be prepared for the worst as well as the best, child," said Mr. Gifford gravely; "life is made up of disappointments, and you must not expect to go through the world without your share of them. If you look at them seriously in the future, you will find that many of them were for the best, however grievously your heart may have been wrung at the time. It was a good maxim of the ancients——"

Nella Carr broke in at this juncture, and stopped the Reverend Theobald Gifford's wanderings.

"I see the caravan out there, and the poles sticking up—and there's a light in the winder still, so they haven't gone to bed. If she's awake she'll know my voice in a minute. I'll just call to her through the door, sir."

Mr. Gifford begged her not to be too hasty, but she dashed away before his warning was completed, and whilst he followed at a pace more befitting the dignity of his cloth, she had, as we are aware, run up the steps of the caravan, knocked at the door with trembling, nervous hands, and called to her mother to admit her.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

NELLA'S TRIBULATION.

THERE was a woman's voice speaking within the caravan, and then a long silence, which seemed still longer to the girl standing anxiously upon the steps, for her impatient hands knocked once more upon the panels of the showman's door.

The door was opened at her second summons, and a fair-haired lady, with a sorrowful face, looked down upon the applicant for admission, whilst a stern, coarse woman's countenance peered over her shoulder with a wondering stare.

"You have come from Grayling's Reformatory to see your mother?" asked Miss Gifford.

"I have come to see my mother—yes," said Nella, with reserve.

"My poor girl, I hope that you will be prepared for a great shock—a great grief, which time will be best able to alleviate. Your mother——"

"Oh, not so very ill as all that, miss," urged

Nella; "not too ill to see me—her daughter, recollect? I'll not worry her, trust me."

They stood looking at each other; they were in the same position when Mr. Gifford came to the foot of the caravan steps, and Augusta regarded him without any surprise—with some such feeling as we have in dreams at times, when the unexpected do not startle us, and even the friends dead long ago live for the nonce as friends again, and excite in us no astonishment.

"You must be prepared for the worst," said Augusta Gifford; "the very worst to you—to her, mayhap, the very best."

Nella walked down one step in her astonishment, and said—

"You'll not tell me that she's dead; you don't mean, can't mean that?"

"Yes, she is dead," was the slow reply.

"Oh, mother—mother, say it isn't true!" The girl rushed up the steps, pushed both visitor and showman's wife aside, and ran into the caravan, where she paused for a moment to look round her, and then tottered towards the bed, snatched away the sheet from the face of the figure lying there so still, and with a wild shriek fell forwards, and sobbed as though her heart would break.

There were no intruders on her grief for awhile.

Mr. Gifford came up the steps, closed the door behind him, and stood, with his back to it, looking down upon the floor ; his sister drew the sheet again over the face of the dead mother, and Mrs. Mudge-son hurried to the cradle to pat the back of her baby, who was beginning to cry, and perhaps to think of its double tooth again. The sobs were long and heavy of the disappointed girl, but they came less frequent after awhile, and presently she was crouching on the floor dry-eyed, with her hands clasped together in her lap—a despairing figure, that neither of the three watchers could regard unmoved, although the minister's features betrayed no emotion at the scene.

Miss Gifford advanced to the girl's side and spoke to her, told her that the mother had died peacefully, hoping a better life for her daughter than her own had been, and leaving a message for her, which should be delivered when she was able to listen to it calmly. She told her of the accident that had befallen the mother on the race day, and how, despite every attention, she had been sinking slowly since ; and of all this recapitulation the girl appeared to take no heed. She sat and looked before her steadily and sternly ; no words appeared to soften her, or even the mention of her mother's death to rouse her from her apathy. Her grief

was over, and there was the future to look to—the result of this to consider perhaps—or else the bitter disappointment of the hour had struck her dumb.

It was a face full of shadow into which Augusta Gifford gazed—a face that had darkened very much, as though its owner could not see her way ahead, now that the one feeble guide of her girl's life was taken from her in the hour that she needed it.

It was a face, moreover, that might grow a handsome one, despite the clouds upon it in that hour, Miss Gifford could not help thinking, as she watched for any sign of awakening thereon.

Nella found her voice at last, when Miss Gifford asked her if there was anything that she could do for her, or anything she needed.

“No,” was the answer given.

“You will come home with me, and presently we will talk of this again.”

“Augusta!” said Mr. Gifford, in mild surprise at this.

Had he been left to himself, it is possible—just possible—that he would have suggested something of the kind; but he was forestalled by his sister, and he considered that he should have been consulted in the first place. Therefore he called out

"Augusta" in a reproving, almost a warning tone, and she came across to him at once, as though she saw her error.

"Theo, I must take this girl home for one night; I wish to talk to her again. She is unsettled—is, I believe, a rash girl, who may act rashly. Her mother died believing that I would do something for her; I promised that I would."

"It was a very absurd promise," said Mr. Gifford. "I don't think that you were justified in saying as much as that."

"I would put her in the right track—as you will do yourself, if it be in your power, Theo—and it may not be a difficult task for either of us."

"I don't know," was the unsympathetic answer; "I'll consider of it all when I have time. But I really cannot see the necessity of taking this wild girl to our house."

"I think I see," Augusta quietly replied.

The above dialogue had been delivered in a low key, but it is possible that a portion of it reached the ears of her who was the subject of discussion, for when Augusta Gifford repeated the offer that she had made, Nella said sullenly—

"I will stop here."

"Stop here!" repeated Miss Gifford. "You cannot stop here."

"Till the morning, I can. She"—nodding her head towards Mrs. Mudgeson—"won't mind for this once."

"Not till the morning, certainly. I should be a brute if I did," said Mrs. Mudgeson bluntly.

"I shan't be in the way—I shan't be in anybody's way long," added Nella, "or beholden to anybody for the living I can get."

"How did you procure permission to leave Grayling's?"

"Never mind," muttered the girl ungraciously.

"You will not go away without seeing me, I hope," said Miss Gifford; "you will remember that I have a message to deliver from *her*."

"Tell it me now."

"No—not now. I think you will be glad to hear it in the morning."

"P'raps. I won't go and promise anything. I haven't thought—oh, I can't think about it all yet," she cried, beating her right hand angrily against the floor.

"There," cried Mrs. Mudgeson, "blest if she hasn't woke the babby up agen—just as I'd got him off nice and comforble. I can't stand any of these games; for I know what you are, if these good people don't. Be civil, and less noisy, and here's your home till daylight."

"What I am!" cried Nella, almost defiantly.
"How do you know what I am?"

"Oh, she has told me many a time," said Mrs. Mudgeson, thumping her baby with both hands, and looking in the rear, like an energetic person making a pie.

"She never told you anything against me, I know."

"Only how feared she was that you'd go away from Grayling's, and back to the old lot that kept you from her once."

"Ah, that's saying nothing against me," said the girl uneasily. "I'll not make any more noise, Mrs. Mudgeson, if you'll let me set here till morning."

"Werry good, then."

"And you will come to me, at my brother's house—any one will tell you which is Mr. Gifford's house—before you go away from Wilton?" said Miss Gifford. "You will not leave before the funeral, I am sure."

"I can come back for that; I need not stay all the time in this place."

"Mudgeson will be gone like a flash of lightning in the morning, as soon as ever the workus people fetches off the poor dear," affirmed Mrs. Mudgeson; "he'll have no more hanging about here, I'm sure. And I should like you, my gal, to be off before he

turns up, if possible, or he'll make a sight of words about it, and think you've come on puppus to rile him, instead of Mrs. Carr."

"All right; I'll go," was the reply.

"Then you will not return with me? There's a gardener's little cottage with a spare room, where you would be more comfortable than here," said Miss Gifford.

"I'll stay here," answered Nella.

"Very well then; and I will wait at home for you, and expect you, for your own sake, not mine, to come to me. If you ever thought that you loved your mother, or that she cared for you, I'm sure you'll come."

The girl glanced at her, but did not reply, and Mrs. Mudgeson offered her apologies.

"I'm sure, it's werry handsome on you, Miss Gifford," she said; "but she is scared like, and this is more like home to her, and she's nearer her she came to see."

"And missed again," cried Nella. "Didn't I tell you coming up the hill how I have always been too late, sir? And now it's too late for good, and never no more can I fetch up with her. It's Nella's luck, and there's no help for it."

She raised her hand to beat the floor again in her impetuosity, remembered Mrs. Mudgeson's baby,

and let her arm fall to her side again, and herself relapse into her past stoicism.

Miss Gifford and her brother both said good-bye to her, but she did not answer them, and they went out of the caravan together, and found that the grey morning was coming fast upon the heath, and that the birds were twittering restlessly in the day-dawn. The minister offered his arm to his sister, and they walked away together.

"It must be a parish funeral, I suppose," said Augusta.

"I don't see that we have anything to do with it. No one can possibly expect that we should pay anything towards the expenses."

"N—no."

"We have done our duty by the poor woman—more than our duty—and there's an end of it. It has been a very unpleasant piece of business from beginning to end."

"You must encounter unpleasant things during your ministry, Theo," said Augusta.

"I shall not seek to evade them. And now that we are on the subject of this caravan business, Augusta, what was your motive for treating me so cavalierly, so like a cypher in my own house, and leaving me without a word to come up to this place?"

"You were writing your sermon, and I did not

like to disturb you and upset all your ideas. I thought, too, that I should be home before the sermon was finished."

"Yes; but it is this hasty method of going to work which misleads people, who are left to form their own conclusions as to motives, which, however clear to the one, are to all others perfectly inexplicable. For——"

"There, I'll not hear another word about it, Theo. I apologise, I go down on my knees and beg your Majesty's pardon; and now let us run all the way home, for my shoes are wet through already."

"Good gracious—of course, in this heavy dew they must be! My dear Augusta, I'm afraid you'll catch your death of cold."

"I hope not. It is not the first time that my feet have been wet."

"You were always very thoughtless about yourself, Augusta; and indeed, I can't say"—and here his cold tones came back again—"that in all cases there is a fair consideration for others shown. Now, to-night——"

"Why, you are not going to begin again, surely?"

"I was going to allude to your asking home that extraordinary child, without for an instant reflecting that I had a voice in the matter."

"It is certainly your house," said Augusta.

"That I do not consider anything to do with the question. But I do consider——"

"Theo, I must run to keep life in me at all. You don't mind ; it's all down-hill, dear."

She suited the action to the word, and Mr. Gifford felt forced to trot rapidly down the hill with her, and thus lost all breath for further argument.

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

HESITATION.

THE licensed proprietor of Mudgeson's Moving Panorama was a business man when there was an opportunity of doing business. Business at a standstill, owing to illegal fairs, wet weather, or a wheel off, not to mention any occurrence so out of the common way as that which had befallen the Mudgesons on Wilton Heath, and Mudgeson grew despairing and drank hard.

There was method in his drunkenness, for he made quite sure in the morning that there was no chance of bettering his condition before he took his first half-quartern, and grew red-faced and quarrelsome. And making his sudden appearance on the Sunday about half-past seven, and finding that Mrs. Carr had departed this life, and Mrs. Carr's daughter had had breakfast at his wife's expense, he turned Nella on to the heath, and then went in search of the parish authorities, whom, by dint of much argument, protestation, and incessant threats to leave

the late Mrs. Carr on the common, he persuaded to send a shell to him before the day was out.

But even then Fate had not grown tired of persecuting Mudgeson, whose mind was made up to travel all that Sunday in the Nottinghamshire direction. He was informed that, Mrs. Carr having died from violence, it would be necessary to hold an inquest on her remains, and that his and his wife's presence as witnesses were compulsory at the Golden Sun, on Tuesday next, at half-past twelve o'clock, and that the summonses to appear would be lodged with him to-morrow, wherever he and his wife might be, and that of any infringement of the law they must take the consequences.

Mudgeson swore a great deal at this, was insolent to his informant, and said that they would find him on the road to Nottingham; but after a long deliberation with himself lying on the heath with his hat cocked over his eyes to keep the sun off, he resolved to remain at Wilton until the Tuesday mentioned, and to have two days' more drinking.

The Tuesday came at last, the inquest was held, the showman and his wife, Doctor Rivers, the jockey whose horse had been the cause of all the mischief, and one or two more witnesses, were examined, and then a verdict of "accidental death" was recorded, and permission given for the parish authorities to dispose

of Mrs. Carr as soon as convenient to themselves. Mudgeson went away at last, the funeral took place in an odd corner of the parish burial-ground, with one mourner at the grave side, a girl, who had mysteriously disappeared until that hour, and who now stood there with a lowering face, like one aggrieved with the fate that had snatched her mother from her.

When the service was ended, she looked down for a moment at the coffin, gave one sharp glance over her shoulder, and then turned away, striding over the graves unceremoniously, in her eagerness to escape all questioning. Some one called to her when she was at the gates, but that only increased her pace, and she was on the high road beyond Wilton, and tramping on resolutely towards London a few minutes afterwards. She went on at the same steady pace for two hours, her bonnet pulled over her face, and her eyes fixed upon the white and dusty road. She had made up her mind to her course in life; she saw it ahead of her, and though it did not give a brightness to her face, or fill her heart with joy, she went on unflinchingly, as though impelled by a power that it was beyond her strength to withstand.

Suddenly she came to a full stop, and remained in the roadway to consider, until a waggon and horses.

drove her to the hedge-bank, on which she sat with her hands holding her temples, and her elbows supported on her knees. The waggoner hazarded his little joke as he passed her, grinned from ear to ear, and offered her a lift on his master's load of fresh-cut hay; and she glanced at him for a moment, and rewarded him with a scowl for his polite attention. She sat under the great hedge-row, thinking for some minutes, struggling to resist some promptings of her better nature, and reasoning, after her own wild fashion, with herself as to the good of it; then she sprang to her feet and went rapidly along the road she had traversed, towards Wilton again.

It was past five in the afternoon when she was in the market-place, making a few inquiries as to the whereabouts of the residence of the Reverend Theobald Gifford, and it was half-past five before she had found courage to unlatch the great gate, and proceed along the carriage-drive towards the house, the first sight of which frightened her once more.

"It's big enough for Grayling's," she muttered. Then she went beneath the portico, and rang timidly at the bell under which the word "servants'" was written. A smart but pert waiting-maid opened the door, and seemed inclined to shut it again before the applicant could say—

"I wish to see Miss Gifford."

"Then she's at dinner, and you can't. What do you want?"

Nella Carr had one favourite reply to questions that disturbed her equanimity, and we have heard it once before. This time the answer was fiercer and harsher, the questioner approaching closer to Nelly's sphere than the reverend gentleman whom she had met in the cornfields in the early morning of last Sunday.

"What's that to you?" cried Nella again.

"Well, I'm sure!" exclaimed the servant tossing her head, "that's impudent, at any rate."

"I've been told to come—that will do, I s'pose. Aint you paid to take in messages from visitors; or do you have your wages for nothing?"

The servant lost all breath for a reply; she remained open-mouthed and mute.

"Tell your missus that the gal—the girl—who was asked to come and see her, when she was at Mudgeson's show, where mother died, has come," said Nella; "and if there's nothing partikler—particular"—she corrected again—"to tell me about her, I'll go away, and thankee. For I don't like the place," she added to herself; "and the sooner gone the better."

The servant would have closed the door before departing on this message, and shut Nella under the

portico, had not the watchful girl been too quick for the domestic, and pushed back the door upon her with an unceremoniousness that indicated that she was not in the best of tempers, and, consequently, not to be trifled with.

"I'm not going to steal anything," she said; "don't be alarmed. I wouldn't take anything here if it was ever so handy."

"But——"

"But don't you try to shut the door in my face. I've been asked to come, and that's enough for you. If I hadn't been, you might have set your dogs on me. Look alive, for I've many miles to go."

She took a seat in the hall chair, and the servant closed the door, and, after a moment's further hesitation, departed on her errand, wondering very much. She was accustomed to poor people calling there at reasonable hours—poor people who were exceedingly humble, and ever treated her with becoming deference, as part of the establishment from which alms and provisions were forthcoming; but this poor, ragged, unceremonious girl, with the ill-tempered face, was a novelty to her, and she wondered at her young mistress's interest in so uncouth a personage.

She passed into the dining-room, where the

Reverend Theobald Gifford and his sister were dining in a kind of semi-state, with the butler and a boy in buttons in attendance.

When time allowed, Mr. Gifford was fond of dining well, and in good style—dressing with as great care, and expecting his sister to be as strictly in rule in a tête-à-tête dinner with him as when a dozen people were invited. A punctilious man was Mr. Gifford, and not wholly unreasonable in wishing to have his dinner in comfort and without interruption—a state of things with which he was not to be favoured on that occasion.

“ Well, what is it, Parks ? ” he asked tetchily.

“ If you please, sir, here’s a young person says that she has been told to come and see Miss Gifford ; and that if there’s nothing to tell her, she’ll go away and thank you.”

Mr. Gifford laid down his knife and fork, and leaned back in his chair.

“ Is it possible that any person can have sent in such a message as that ? ” he exclaimed.

“ She’s very insolent indeed, sir,” said Parks, who was anxious to present matters in the worst light, and did not scruple to transfer remarks addressed to her to the young lady on her master’s right hand ; “ and hopes Miss Gifford will look alive, because she’s many miles to go.”

"What kind of a person is she?" asked Miss Gifford quietly.

"A wild-looking girl. She said something about Mudgeson's show."

"My dear Theo, what did I tell you?" cried Augusta, clapping her hands in her excitement. "I said that she would not go away without a word—that she was not the callous, ungrateful girl you thought her. Show her into the waiting-room, Parks, and say that I will be with her immediately. Now, who is the better judge of human nature, brother?"

Mr. Gifford did not relish this remark before his servants, and tried to frown down his sister's impulsiveness. He had prophesied that Nella Carr would take no more notice of them—that she was an ungrateful girl, hard-hearted and ignorant, and would go her own bad way, caring not for those who had been kind to her mother. He had been interested in her on that early Sunday morning when he met her first, and had since that day made a few inquiries, and written one letter to a friend in London concerning her, and then had summed up the salient points of the stranger's character, and promulgated a verdict concerning her that was not flattering.

Miss Gifford had been told of all that her brother

had discovered concerning Nella, and had treated the matter far too lightly; persisting in her own opinion, too, against that of men more accustomed than she to deal with weak and erring mortals. This was irritating, and the incumbent of Wilton informed his sister that he thought his opinions were entitled to respect, and that she was far too young and innocent to reason with him concerning the dark side of human life, or to attempt to understand it; and now—what was still more irritating—Augusta was right and he was wrong, for the child of the woman who had died on Wilton Heath was in the hall waiting to say good-bye.

“I wish that you would be a little less hasty, Augusta,” Mr. Gifford said, “and restrain your exultation until you are quite certain that I am wrong. You hear how impertinent this girl has been.”

“Yes, I hear,” said Augusta. “Poor Nella is not refined, I am afraid. Show her into the waiting-room, Parks, and say that I will be with her immediately.”

Parks withdrew, and the clergyman’s sister rose.

“You will not mind my leaving you, Theo?”

“The girl can surely wait till you have dined, Augusta,” said Mr. Gifford, becoming still more grave.

"She might be able to do that. But I can't wait to dine ; I am impatient to bring you back a better report of my odd protégée. Pray excuse me, Theo."

"Very well, Augusta ; you must do as you like. But it seems to me that there is no occasion to set every one aside for this wicked creature."

"Hush ! She might hear you. You don't know that it is all true yet."

"Can you think for one instant that my friend would forward to me an incorrect statement—a garbled version of the facts ?"

"No ; it's as true as he believes it to be. But here is the girl to speak for herself. I like every one to have a fair hearing."

"I have entirely lost my interest in her," said Mr. Gifford ; "and I am astonished at yours."

"I see the mother's face now ; I hear her despairing words, and my own promise, which seemed to make her heart light at the last."

"Your promise—what promise was that, then ?"

"Not to lose sight of the daughter too readily, or let her drift away to her dark estate without an effort of my own. Why, if she had not come back, I should have tried to find her, Theo."

"You are an odd girl—full of the wildest fancies. The idea of making a promise to a stranger, whose——"

"Whose misery touched me. Don't blame me for being merciful."

"I—I don't blame you, Augusta," said Mr. Gifford; "all very right, perhaps, but such matters should be approached with great circumspection."

"The woman was dying."

"Yes, that was awkward, certainly. By the way, don't let that girl go away till I have seen her again; I think that I should like to say a few words."

"But you have lost all interest in her, Theo."

"Did I say that? Well, not my interest in a poor creature going wrong for the want of a little salutary advice. I don't know that I want to see her, but it is my duty, as a Christian minister, to do so. This lamb will be quite cold when you return Augusta."

"Meanwhile my sheep—my black sheep—is getting quite warm, at being left alone so long."

"How you can jest on this painful subject I cannot understand," said Mr. Gifford.

"What, the cold lamb subject, Theo?"

"Miss Gifford, your manner is objectionable." And the Reverend Theobald Gifford looked seven feet high, at least, until his sister went to him, put her arms round his starched neck, and kissed him.

"You should be used to my manner by this

time," said she. "What a dull being you are, not to smile more often at my little pleasantries!"

"There are times when pleasantries are unseasonable, Gus."

"Yes, but not at this time."

"Indeed! Why not?"

"Why, because I have the best of the argument, to be sure, and she *did* keep her word, and come back, just as I told you that she would. There, my grave old goose, is that not enough to make a woman's heart light—to confound her opponent's prophecies, and prove that her own were correct?"

"There is no sobering you down, Gus," said Mr. Gifford, the muscles of his face relaxing; "I never met such a girl in my life."

"Get rid of her as soon as you can, Theo," said Augusta.

"Ah! but how is that to be done?" he answered.

"By marrying old Lady Maynard, or some other member of your flock as docile as she, and not quite so old. There, don't mind me, dear."

She saw that she had touched upon a painful chord: marrying and giving in marriage, with the mourning for the wife still worn in the house, was not a topic calculated to bring the smiles to Mr. Gifford's face yet awhile. She begged his pardon, and hastened away; and he sat looking very

thoughtfully before him, until his own share of lamb was as cold as his sister's.

"My poor Edith!" he said once to himself. "As if I should ever marry again and forget you."

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

A DEAD FAILURE.

MISS ELEANOR CARR, better known amongst her friends and relations as Nella Carr, was already waxing impatient at the delay when Miss Gifford came into the waiting-room.

She had been curtly told by the maid-servant, whose dignity she had upset in the first instance, that her mistress would see her presently, and then had been shown into a small and pretty room, and shut in with a bang of the door that was distressing to the nerves. And there she had waited very impatiently for Miss Gifford's appearance, even though that young lady had given up her dinner for her, and had only lingered to exchange a few words with her brother.

Nella had begun a hasty meal off her bonnet strings, and was beating her foot—almost shoeless now—upon the carpet, when Augusta Gifford entered.

A quick glance at the lady as she came into the room, and then the half-nervous, half-defiant manner that had been characteristic of her from the first, was strongly developed.

"I thought that you were never coming, and that you didn't want to see me, after all," she murmured.

"Yes, I wanted to see you very much," said Miss Gifford, in reply. "I have been waiting for you anxiously. Did you open that window?"

"Yes, I did," answered Nella; "for if it had been anybody else but you, I should have stepped out of it and run."

"For what reason?"

Miss Gifford had to ask this question twice before the answer came.

"Because I don't like anybody else about here, and I don't know what game they may be after. Putting me in quod p'raps."

"In where?"

"In prison, if they could make a case agin—against me," she said, correcting her English after her customary plan, "which they would have a trouble to do, for I've gone straight for years. Now, what did mother say?"

"Ah! that is more to the point," said Augusta, sitting down near her strange companion. "The mother who died full of hope in you, is a subject

that must touch your heart, or you would not have come back here."

"I walked—miles away to London," she replied slowly; "I felt glad to be away from the place for good like, and then I came back, all at once. I don't know what for," she added, with a short laugh, "but here I am."

"Perhaps it was because you had promised me that you would return,"

"I didn't promise."

"Well, nearly promised. I considered it a promise, and have been waiting for you ever since."

"What did mother say to you, or tell you to tell me?" she asked.

"She prayed that you were growing with every day a better girl," said Miss Gifford, watching very attentively the effect of her words on the lowering countenance of her listener; "and she died believing that you would turn away from a path that had been full of harm to her and you. She was hopeful of that at the very last, Nella."

"Was she though?" and the girl's lip quivered for an instant before she looked straight into the speaker's face again.

"Thinking you were still at Grayling's"—the girl started, and then relapsed into stolidity once more—"she gave me a message to deliver to you.

‘Tell her,’ she said, ‘about me; how sorry I have been concerning her, how hopeful lately, trying myself to be worthy of her when she came out, knowing good from evil, and trusting in me as I would have trusted in her.’ That, Nella, is her message to you.”

“And I was coming on to her then.”

“Yes, you ran away from Grayling’s to come to her; was it not?—not to go back to the people with whom you were once?”

“No, not to go back to them. It was like seeing mother for the first time when she came to Grayling’s and they let her in, for I was a young ’un when I was led away, and didn’t know any better. Oh, I really didn’t, Miss Gifford.”

“And these people?”

“I’d rather not say anything against them, either; they weren’t so bad to me, and I’m not likely to point ’em out to anybody; and after all, I was thinking to-day that I’d better give up, and go back to them. I couldn’t see the use of dragging on by myself, and being thought by everybody as big a thief as I was four years ago, when last took up for it.”

“You were going back. Oh, I am sorry to hear this.”

“What is the good of my fighting to be good?”

"Is it so hard a fight, then?"

"Yes, for they aint kind at Grayling's; they don't allow for what we have been, and they're hard on us, and down on us; and there's one woman there—I hope she'll die soon, like mother!—who slaps your sins in your face, and then gives you bread and water when you get as cross as she is. I couldn't stand it at last, and I ran away. I knew I should like mother, and get on with her, and I did hope to grow better with her bit by bit."

"I would go back to Grayling's, now."

"Who? Me? Oh, no, that won't do."

"Going back of your own free will, and telling them all the truth, will not procure you a heavy punishment, and in two more years, if you are patient, industrious, and honest, I will come and fetch you myself, finding for you a situation where, at least, kind words and earnest hearts shall watch your progress upwards."

"No, it won't do," she repeated.

"Why not?"

"It's too good to think about. Nobody would trust me long. I can't keep good at Grayling's."

"Not for the dead mother's sake, Nella?"

"Oh, don't, please."

She spread her two hands before her face for an instant, then clasped them together, and looked

aside. She was thinking if it were possible to live for two years longer at that reformatory, where everybody was "down upon her," and considered her incorrigible; where good seed had been sown, and a feeble shoot or two of a better nature put forth, despite much blundering of over-zealous officials, and the mistake of one incapable, whom the cruel folly of favouritism had placed there.

She started as the hand of Augusta Gifford fell lightly on her shoulder, and then became aware of a sweet sad face looking down upon her with an expression in it that was new to witness.

"Try, Nella," said Miss Gifford; "give me another promise and say you'll try. Promise your mother and me."

"You don't know what a thief I've been?"

"I don't care."

"No?" and the girl looked up with increasing wonderment.

"I shall only care about the future, wherein you are learning to know better, and preparing for a better life. I promised the mother that I would look after you; now you promise me that you will be worth the study."

"I'll—I'll go back to Grayling's, Miss Gifford. It's a chance for me: she wished it—you wish it, and bless you for it, whatever becomes of me."

"You must speak hopefully, not despairingly."

"I can't do more than the best that's in me ; but I'll do that," she answered.

"Well said. I trust you, I believe in you."

Nella Carr rose and re-tied her bonnet-strings with a jerk.

"I'm going now. Good-bye, ma'am. I trust in you, too, to think of me."

"I will write to you at Grayling's very often.

"Thankee—thank you, I should say."

"I intend to write to Grayling's to-night, to the lady-superintendent, about you."

"Thank you, Miss Gifford ; you might put in a good word there, I dare say."

"And there is money for your train to London, which you will reach to-night by ten o'clock, and thence at once to Wandsworth, of course."

"Of course ; for I would not sleep in London for the world, though they won't like being woke up to take me in at the old place. But there—there, I'm going ; who's afraid ?"

She was ready to depart, when Mr. Gifford came with his stately step into the room, holding a pocket Bible in his hand. His sister glanced into his face, read a long sermon therein, and was quick in her actions accordingly.

"Thank you, Theo," she said, snatching the

Bible from the minister's hands; "here's a little present that my brother has brought you. Keep it and read it for both our sakes sometimes. Here, I'll write your name in it. Don't say anything now to her, Theo, but let her go back to Grayling's."

"Back to Grayling's! Is she going back, then?"

"Yes, of her own free will, to be sure. If she wished very much to see her mother, poor girl, that was not a great sin, especially if they were hard with her occasionally, although hard for her good, of course. There, go away, Nella, and pray don't lose the train. I shan't forget you."

Nella went away, came back with a sudden rush to shake Miss Gifford's hand in hers, and then departed without further protestations as to her future amendment.

But the minister's sister was sanguine, and her brother was hopeful too, though he did not say too much, lest Augusta should speak too triumphantly of her one success, and twit him with his want of judgment.

Miss Gifford wrote a long letter to the lady-superintendent that night—sat up long into the night to write her best as she called it, and to do her best by friendly intercession for the girl who had pledged her word to return. She spoke of the dying mother,

told all that she knew concerning her, and expressed her own convictions of the good that was in the girl, and of that which, by proper training, might yet result in much that was excellent.

A week afterwards she received her reply, and this was it :—

Grayling's Reformatory, July 31st.

The Lady Superintendent's compliments to Miss Gifford, and begs to inform her that the girl called Nella Carr has not returned to the establishment.

"I said that girl was not to be trusted," said the Reverend Theobald Gifford quietly.

CHAPTER THE NINTH.

AN ECCENTRIC OFFICIAL.

NELLA CARR saved the train to London by only a few seconds ; the railway clerk was dropping down his window when the last customer thrust forward her long bony arm, and shrieked out, "Third class, London."

There was a bustle amongst the guards outside, and one man dancing about the platform with a green flag, like an excited Fenian : there were men and women leaning out of the railway carriages, shaking hands with friends who had come to see them off ; there was the station-master bullying a porter with a portmanteau and a box that had arrived as late as Nella, and a vacant youth worrying everybody and getting into everybody's way with inquiries as to whether that train was going to Newcastle.

Nella looked round her, bewildered by the confusion of the place, when a carriage door was un-

fastened by some passenger from within, and a voice called out—

“Here you are—London.”

Nella hesitated at this invitation, like a girl on the alert as she always was, but moments were precious, and Wilton station had a character to maintain for punctuality.

“Jump in, young woman,” cried a guard behind her, “or you’ll lose the train. We can’t stop here all night.”

There were two or three persons inside the carriage, Nella perceived at a second glance, and she half climbed into the compartment and was half pushed in by the railway guard, and then the door was banged upon her, a whistle sounded, a shrill and piercing scream from the engine responded, and the train went clanking out of the station on its journey, amid the last good-byes and farewell blessings that were called forth as it moved away.

Nella screwed herself into the corner of the carriage where she had been ensconced, and after awhile looked furtively from beneath her bonnet at the occupants, wondering which was the man or woman who had been interested in her arrival, and solicitous to find a place for her. The more she thought of that, the more she was puzzled, for there was nothing attractive in her appearance to lead strangers to put them-

selves out of their way for the sake of her company. Her dress and shawl were torn in many places, her boots had gone to destruction, her bonnet was a study as to what it had been, or of what material it was originally composed, and her face was very dirty. Altogether, a disreputable figure even for a third-class black-hole, and one at whom her fellow-travellers gazed curiously before becoming accustomed to her presence in their midst. Nella did not look up whilst she remained the object of all these wondering stares, but when the passengers had subsided into themselves, and the train was rattling swiftly through the night, she peered carefully about her in her turn.

The train was not full ; there were only four passengers and a half beside herself in that compartment, and they consisted of a sleepy woman, nursing an overgrown and sleepy boy, whose socks and mottled legs interfered with people's comfort ; a soldier, who was smoking a short pipe in defiance of the rules and by permission of the assembled company, who, however, did not like it much ; a red-faced countryman in a smock-frock and a neat bundle at the end of a stick, looking as though he had stepped into his seat from the middle of a melodrama ; and a grey-whiskered, black-eyed, sunburnt man in a coat buttoned to his chin, and with huge,

large-veined hands crossed upon the top of a stout yellow stick which he carried.

It was this last man, Nella fancied, who had called to her to enter, for she was sure that he regarded her attentively when her gaze was directed away from him. Once she looked full at him, in order to confound him, and discovered after awhile that she had confounded herself instead, for he continued to survey her with a strange expression, until she dropped her eyelids and looked down again.

It was not a rude stare with which she had been favoured, scarcely so much a stare curious as a stare intent ; but Nella resisted it, and disliked it—thought that there might be a danger of recognition in it, for the Grayling folk had possibly given notice of her disappearance to the police, and thus the official spies might be after her, and this was one of them. He looked not unlike a detective policeman—she had had her experience of the police when she was nine or ten years of age, and knew how sharp they were, and what peculiar eyes they had, which let nothing escape them in the way of evidence. Years ago she had been set to watch the police in their turn—to follow those she knew about the streets—to wait for them on dark landing-places and at the entries of courts and alleys, and give the alarm when they were coming to friends upon the alert, and her past

experience had not all been worked out of her by the discipline of Grayling's.

This man was probably a detective officer, and it was all up with her, she thought. She was going back to Grayling's, but he would not believe her, would even quietly slip a pair of handcuffs on her wrists presently, and whisper that she must come with him, and that it was better not to make a fuss about it. He would take the credit of having effected a clever capture, and she would lose her last chance of turning to the light. She must be on her guard, and try the doctrine of conciliation, if he spoke to her, or showed in any way that he knew whom he was addressing. The air defiant never paid with the police, and she understood her customers.

But he simply continued to stare at her, and as mile after mile was hurried by she began to think that perhaps she had been too precipitate in her conclusions, and that it was not her ill-luck to be baffled in this manner. She grew accustomed to his presence, and after awhile her thoughts diverged to the Giffords, who had given her good advice, promised her their future help, and presented her with a little pocket Bible as an earnest of their promises. The one fair face which had looked down into hers, and seemed to touch her heart, was before her once again, and she dozed off dreaming of it.

She woke up with a start. The train had stopped, guards were calling out the name of the station, the soldier and the countryman were tumbling over her feet in their eagerness to leave the carriage;—if the man with the grey whiskers and the pertinacious stare would only follow them!

But the man remained and kept her and the sleeping woman in the corner company, and the engine gave another scream and started with its load once more.

When they were fairly off, Nella's suspicions were again aroused. The man glanced at the woman and child, then leaned forwards and looked Nella in the face.

"You are the girl who was at the funeral this morning?" he asked in a low voice.

"What funeral?" Nella inquired, for the sake of gaining time rather than for any other reason.

"Mrs. Carr's funeral—that poor woman, you know, who died on Wilton Heath last week."

"Yes, I was there," was the slow reply.

"I know; I called to you, but you would not answer me."

"Where were you then?"

"I was looking over the wall at the back, watching it all."

Yes, this was the policeman of whom she had been

in fear so long, avoiding all the towns and sleeping in the night amongst the corn away from the haunts of men who might have their suspicions of her, or have heard of Grayling's truant.

"Your name is Nella?" he said, after a silence of some minutes' duration.

"Yes," was the answer given him; "I don't tell a lie about it, and make matters worse. My name is Nella!"

"To think that I should have run against you like this, after looking for you everywhere," he said; "why, I was giving you up, girl, and coming on to London!"

"And I was fool enough to walk into this carriage," cried Nella; "well, if that isn't like my luck, I'm a real born lady! But look here, sir; I'm going right back to Grayling's to give myself up to them, and say I'm very sorry. You needn't believe me, but Miss Gifford and her brother—who's a real minister—will bear me out in what I'm telling you. I've thought it all over, and I want to grow up good for the sake of those who'll help me if I do."

The stranger looked bewildered at this outburst, and before he could reply Nella went on again—

"Don't you think that the judge 'll say that I wasn't so bad, and perhaps give me another chance, sir, and send me on to Grayling's himself? Don't

you think you might shut your eyes for once and let me go on of my own accord and stop there, as upon my honour I will, whatever happens, or however much they are down upon me. Why, it's because we don't get half a chance we grow so bad, you see."

"Yes, that's true," said the man, and then, to Nella's astonishment, he leaned his forehead on the hands that were crossed upon the stick, and remained silent for awhile. Was he really thinking it over? Had her entreaties had their effect upon this man, whose knowledge of crime assured him how few were the chances that rose up in the way of those who wished to turn away, and was he thinking that he might give her a chance too, and no one the wiser but themselves? He raised his head at last, leaned back against the wooden partition, and gave an odd sigh. This was a soft-hearted policeman at any rate, thought Nella, to go sighing about the country like that.

"You ran away from Grayling's three weeks ago, Nella?"

"Yes, sir."

"Three weeks last Tuesday, wasn't it?"

"Yes, exactly. They have told you all about it, then?"

"Yes, they have told me all about it; but I don't

know anything of these Gifford people. Who are they?"

Nella informed him. She grew wondrously explicit, seeing that her listener was interested, and related the whole story; in what manner she had met the brother and sister, how kind they had been to her mother, what her mother had wished, and how, at the last, she had promised to return to Grayling's, and do her best for one who had pledged her word never to lose sight of her.

"It was as if it was meant to be," was the slow answer; "and you have the pluck to go through with it?"

"Yes, if you'll let me."

"If I let you; oh, yes, I'll let you. There, I will not interfere."

"Oh, what a good fellow you are! If there were more of you——"

"You needn't go on like that," was the abrupt interruption here. "We fellows of the police don't admire sentiment, and don't care for thanks. What has become of all the Vates Street lot?"

"I don't know."

"Have you ever heard?"

"No, I haven't; and if I had——"

"Well?" asked the man, as she came suddenly to a full stop.

"I was a-going to say, and if I had I shouldn't tell you; but though I wouldn't split upon them, I need not own it, and you so kind to me. But you don't look like a fellow who'd be very savage with me, because I didn't give them up."

"It's right enough, though they're not relations of yours."

"They took care of me when there was nobody else to do it."

"When your mother was in prison, and your father was dying in Australia, where he was transported. Oh, yes! they took care of you, and taught you to steal, and sent you on the streets to pick pockets and rob from shop-doors, and so the old game—the same old desperate hand-to-hand game. What has become of Mother Wisby?"

"I don't know. Upon my honour I don't know nothing of any on 'em."

"So much the better. And now it's a bargain; you mean going back to Grayling's?"

"I do indeed."

"Then I won't interfere; and now think yourself lucky, Nella, and don't say anything about me letting you off, or a rare bit of mischief I shall get into, and no end of trouble. What has become of your uncle George?"

"I didn't know I had one."

"Ah! I suppose not. He was the only respectable member of the family—your mother's family, not your wretched father's. Did you never hear that he went to China, and settled down there? I dare say that he's in China still."

"Very likely," said Nella, yawning. She was scarcely interested in her uncle George; she had never heard her mother speak of him, and he had certainly taken no interest in them.

"Keep good at Grayling's, Nella. Supposing that he was to come back a rich man, and leave you all his money?"

"Ah! that would be something like an uncle," was the indifferent answer.

"If I were a girl like you, I should be glad to think that I had a relation somewhere to take pity on me some day. Who knows—who can tell? We read of funny things in books and newspapers, and I dare say that they are not all lies. Weren't you sorry when your mother died, Nella?"

"I just was, sir."

"And yet I can't make out that you could have seen much of her—she in prison, you at Vates Street. And when she came out of prison last, you had gone to Grayling's."

"So we dodged about; but she used to come regular to Grayling's, sir, when it was found out

that she had dropped the whole lot, and talk to me, and beg me to do all that I was told, and wait for her. I on'y guessed then what sort of mother she was."

"An unlucky woman — an awfully unlucky woman," soliloquised the man.

"You've been a long while on the beat to remember all of us," said Nella, "and yet I don't recollect your face. But then I was so precious young."

"Yes, precious young."

They were silent for awhile after this, and Nella, easy in her mind, went off to sleep again, whilst the grey-whiskered man still watched her—thought a great deal of her, her past and future, it was evident from the expression, almost an earnest one, upon his face. He was a considerate policeman, for he let her sleep on, and perplexed her with no more questions; he was content to watch her from his opposite seat, or to look as if he were watching her, at any rate. Station after station was passed or stopped at, and still the girl slept soundly; and it was only when nearing the last station before entering into London, that she woke up with a start and said—

"Where am I?"

"Close on London. This is the last station but one we're coming to now. I ought to get out here by rights," he muttered.

Nella heard all that he had said, and exclaimed—

“Oh, don’t come out of your way, please! Trust me to find my road to Grayling’s.”

“You are afraid that I shall alter my mind, and take you with me?”

“No, I am not. You wouldn’t be such a sneak as that, I know.”

“I don’t think I would.”

“I don’t think that you are exactly a policeman, mind you,” said the shrewd girl; “you haven’t talked like one lately.”

“How should I know all about you and your old games, then?” he answered sharply.

“You might be one of the old lot yourself.”

“Then I should ask you to come to Vates Street, and join us all again.”

“Ah! so you would.”

The train slackened speed, and stopped. The girl looked wistfully at her companion.

“You want me to go, I see that,” he said, rising, “and to keep your mind easy, why, there, I start, and so good-night to you. I dare say—that is, I should not very much wonder if you were to see me again. Do you think you’d know this ugly, sun-burnt face?”

He advanced it close to Nella’s, and she looked into it, shivered a little at the piercing eyes, and

said that she should, however long a time might elapse before she met with it again.

"Coming out of Grayling's a respectable young woman, perhaps you'll meet it."

"You'll be out of the force then?"

"Ye—yes; and I may be curious enough to call and ask what has become of you. I shan't be very much surprised to hear that you are doing well."

"I mean to try—and try hard, sir."

"That's right. There's nothing like it. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, sir."

He shook hands with her—an act of deference from a gentleman high in the mysterious potent "Force" which she had always held in awe, that surprised her very much—and then he opened the door of the carriage and let himself on to the platform, where he remained until the train moved on again, although Nella Carr looked not out of the window after him.

CHAPTER THE TENTH.

OLD FRIENDS.

THE train reached London a few minutes afterwards, and Nella left the carriage and mingled with the crowd of passengers which streamed right and left, and ran against each other in eagerness for home. Her home was a strict—an awfully strict—place, and her heart did not leap at the prospect: on the contrary, sank with the idea of that reception which was close upon her. She had not considered it greatly during her homeward ride; rather, she had looked beyond it to results, passed over intervening years to where the fair and gentle woman was to meet her and take care of her, as she thought—but as it was never to be! She had spoken of Nella's luck—meaning her own ill-luck, which was not to change so readily—not to be as but the turning of a leaf between evil and good, here the darkness, there the sunshine, and for ever afterwards the better life.

She was outside the terminus, when some one who had followed her touched her on the arm, and as she

paused, came up with her, and shook both her hands within her own, saying—

“Lor bless us, and take care of us! To think that this is Nella Carr passing all her friends without a word to say to ’em. Don’t you know me, my young beauty, who was allers more than a mother to you, when your larful parients were under lock and key? It’s worth a sight of untold gold to see the likes of you agin. Come, look into the old gal’s face, and say that four years aint gone and spiled her handsum cast of counting-house.”

“Are you—oh! are you Mrs. Wisby?”

“Yes, my love; can it be any one else? Who else sticks to her friends like mother W.? there isn’t one in all Westminster. Did I ever give you a cross word?”

“Not many, at any rate.”

“Then put your arm round my neck, and kiss me like a lamb.”

But the lamb held back and regarded her dubiously, even with some trembling of frame, which the darkness outside the terminus sufficiently disguised. It was not too dark there, however, to see what kind of person Mrs. Wisby was; unmistakably poor, unmistakably plain; age without a feature to redeem it from its ugliness—a something loathsome, to recoil from as from a thing of evil which had crept forth in the darkness for its prey.

She was a short, spare woman, who stooped considerably; a thin-faced woman, with an incipient beard, a horrible mole at one corner of her mouth, and red lids to her eyes, like a rabbit. Sharp, ferrety grey eyes they were too, twinkling with mischief—with that darker and more awful mischief which has no humour in it, and is to be always feared by honest men and women. Toothless, yellow-faced, and her whole physiognomy receding into the background of a large straw-bonnet and crumpled cap-front—this was Mrs. Wisby, who, it might almost be thought, had been looking out for Nella, so strange it seemed that she should chance upon her at that time and place. Mrs. Wisby noted the reluctance of Nella to approach her closely, but made no comment upon it. Her feelings were wounded, but she was a woman who disguised her feelings when it was profitable to do so; ergo, a woman of the world, who deserved to rise therein.

“You’ll tell us all about what you’ve been doing, dear,” said Mrs. Wisby; “how you got on after my school was left, and the Bobbies were down upon my pet scholar afore I knew where you’d gone to. Oh, it nearly broke my heart, Nella, after all the hand-sum teaching that I’d gived you, and you getting on so well, too.”

“Don’t say nothing more about it. I don’t care

to hear of it now, and I don't like standing with you in this place."

"Shall we go over the way and have a glass of nice mild ale together? If there's one thing more freshening on a summer's night than ale, I don't know on it myself. Mild sixpenny, Nella, at my expense, for old acquaintance' sake."

"No, thankee."

"If you don't like my company arterwards, have got too grand for it, or are in a better school, where they can make it pay better and do more for you, why, I aint a jealous disposition, and won't say no to your going off at once. You know my way by this time?"

"Yes; but I've given up the school."

"Where are you living now? What are you up to?"

"I'm at Grayling's."

"Why, how can that be, when you cut from there three weeks ago?"

"Oh! you know that too."

"It's all over the place; there's a reward of twenty pounds offered for you, and your face and figger described in printed bills, which they sticks up at police-stations and under railway arches, and which everybody reads. And you a-going about with your bonnet off your head like that, a-brazening it out."

"A reward offered for me ! I did not know that."

"It's everywhere too ; and twenty punds isn't to be sneezed at when one has on'y to clap a hand upon you so, and cry 'stop thief.'"

A kite's claw rather than a hand emerged from the old Scotch shawl the woman wore, and fastened itself upon the shoulder of the girl, who shrank away with a startled cry, but could not shake the hand off. Was she to be baffled at the last like this ? and was the woman who had first taught her to steal, and to make war upon respectable society, the woman to take the blood-money for her capture ?

"Ah, you're scared, Nella ! your narves aint as they ought to be—but you're safe with the old mother. In all my life, unless set on to it by rank ingratitude, I never split upon a pal. A glass of sixpenny, Nella, and neither you nor me too proud to drink each other's 'elths."

"And then you'll let me go my way ?" said Nella.

"I wouldn't stop you against your own free will for all the Ingies," said Mrs. Wisby, elevating both her hands, in one of which was a huge market-basket with a key in it, which made a clattering within, as she raised her arms in this protesting attitude. "I'm not one to interfere with any living soul ; it aint my way—you ought to know that it aint my way."

"Very well. Let us make haste, then."

"You're in a hurry to be off."

"I am indeed."

The woman dropped her voice, and looked eagerly into her companion's face.

"Who's school now?"

"Nobody's."

"I'll swear it's Jenkinson's. What's the good of purtending that it isn't?"

"Mother Wisby," said Nella, calling her almost unconsciously by the old familiar appellative, "I'm going back to Grayling's to-night."

"What, to give yourself up?"

"Yes, to give myself up."

"Tear me up, root and branch, I don't believe it. What, you!—come, that's all fiddle-de-dee, my dear, and bubble and squeak, and won't do for the old mother."

"I mean it. Whatever happens, whether I'm too late or not, I go to Grayling's place to-night, and say, 'Here I am, do your worst with me; I hadn't a right to keep away, and so I came back of my own accord.'"

"Bless us living and dead; but if that's your game you might as well let one of us earn the twenty pounds."

"No, that wouldn't do. Of my own accord, just as I promised her."

"Who?"

"A lady who was kind to mother when she was a-dying?"

"What, has she gone, then—Mrs. Carr that was?"

"Yes, gone."

"Poor dear!" with a sudden sniff that nearly shook her bonnet off, "so she's off. That comes trapesing about fairs and meddling at what fools call an honest living. I wonder who lives honest in a world like this?—who can? This door, my gal, the tother bar is too conspicuous for one with twenty pounds upon her head, and of course you want to do it of your own accord. I see how nice and noble that will look, but what's it for?"

"I've done with the old life; upon my honour I have," cried Nella energetically, as they passed through the swing glass door of the jug and bottle entrance to the Prince Regent public-house, "and it isn't you or the likes of you to stop me now."

"You was allers werry firm," said Mrs. Wisby soothingly. "I will say this on you, that if ever there was a gal who said what she meant and did what she said she'd do, that gal was little Nella; and that's why you was a hornament in our midst,

and every one set store by you. Oh, the yaller boys I've made by you," she moaned forth in a whisper inaudible to the young man who was drawing the mild sixpenny, "and now to give up all on us like this! Why, the marks of Wisby School aint left you yet, nor aint likely to leave you. I rubbed 'em in too deep."

"No, they aint left me. If I ever get a lady and wear a ball-dress," said she, with a short laugh, "they'll stare at the diamond pattern on my arm, and I must tell them that it was a trick of mine when I was a child. Ah me! I never was a child!" she cried.

"There, don't get shrieking out like that," cried Mrs. Wisby; "what's the use of all this noise and blather? You're going your own foolish way, and I'm a going mine, and there's an end on it. I don't see what there is to kick at."

"I'm not kicking at anything, I was on'y thinking."

"Which can't do no good. Thinking never was in my line, yet just look at me."

To look at her then, standing with her elbow resting on the pewter-covered counter of the Regent, with the lights from the ormolu chandelier over the bar chimney-piece and in the plate-glass windows blazing down upon her, was not to think that she

was a model to be copied, for all her self-laudation. Nella regarded her for a moment, and then shuddered to herself as at the ogre of the far-off days which were, right enough, poor girl, no childhood's days to her. Surely she had advanced a step or two at Grayling's, to feel that this old hag belonged to a past which she would prefer to outlive—to which it seemed almost impossible that she could ever step back!

She was sipping at her glass of mild sixpenny, and thinking how she could most gracefully suggest that it was time for her to bid Mrs. Wisby good-evening, when a young woman, with a bold-looking face and slouching gait, came into the gin-palace.

"Why, here's Sally," exclaimed Mrs. Wisby. "Why, whoever would have thought on seeing you?"

"What, mother? Well, the luck o' this night!"

Sally looked at the mother's companion, and seemed endeavouring to recollect where she had seen Nella Carr before.

"Ah, you may look," said Mrs. Wisby, "but that's a gal that's growed out of all knowledge since she and you was pals."

"It isn't—no, it can't be—Nella Carr?"

"Yes, it's Nella—our Nella that was," affirmed Mrs. Wisby, "but who has growed too proud for

us, and is going to be good all on a sudden too, like the poor critters in the penny trax. My eyes! the lark of that, now!"

"Why, Nella, how are you?" and Sally extended a very red and dirty fist towards her.

"I'm pretty well," answered Nella, and then she took the girl's hand and shook it in her own, wondering more than ever when she should be able to get away from them.

"This is a sight to do one good," cried Sally. "Why, you remember Dally, as you used to call me, who nursed you when you was on'y three years old, and sung you off to sleep at nights in Mother Wisby's old crib in Vates Street. That was arter your mother and father were in prisun, more's the pity, for clever ones was both of them; we aint many like 'em now. Not the nouse, not the edication. You aint forgot me?"

No, Nella had not forgotten her. This was a young woman who had been kind to her when she was left in charge at Wisby's, and had taken care of her after her own way, and loved her after her own way too, and despite those melancholy surroundings wherein it was hard for love to exist. Not long ago—only a few days—even a few hours, when she was tramping on her road to London, she would have been glad to see Sally—to welcome her

again as the best of the worst ones amongst whom her life had been cast—one who had been kind, if rough, and sacrificed something for her at times, so that she should not feel too motherless when the prison gates had clanged against her natural protectors. And now Sally was an expert professional, the leading girl in the school which Mrs. Wisby kept; and time had altered her, hardened her features, and given her a love for gin, which she ordered of the young man behind the bar, calling him William in a friendly manner, to which he did not readily respond.

“Yes, I know you,” said Nella; “you were always kind to me. I don’t know what I should have done without you once, although you mustn’t think the worst of me because I’m in a hurry to get away.”

“Why, where do you think of going to?”

“Ah, that you’ll never guess, Sally,” said Mrs. Wisby, “and you’ll larf fit to kill yerself to hear. It’s Grayling’s place, where they grind all little thieves into angels, and give ’em wings, and tell ’em to show the world how good they’ve got by being regularly whacked. Nella, they’ll ’arf kill you when they get ’old o’ you agin.”

“Let ’em,” answered Nella.

“But,” said the amazed Sally, “aint you run

away? aint them bills about you? How can you go back?"

"I can't explain. I don't care what they do to me, but back I go."

"They'll turn you over to the prisun coves agin."

"I must chance that."

"Well, then, I'd think about it to-morrow, not go riling them all by waking 'em up to-night. Look how late the time is, and you've got to get to Wandsworth."

Nella glanced up at the great white dial, at which she had already glanced more than once, and her heart sank to see that the small hand was close upon eleven, and the minute hand not far behind it.

"Ten minutes to eleven, and that clock's slow," said Mrs. Wisby.

"I don't care how late it is; go I must and will."

"When we heerd that you had been seen at one or two races—Jones saw you, so did Green—we made sure that you were on the lay agin, and tired out with Grayling's."

"So I was, then."

Nella went to the door to look out, and Mrs. Wisby, in an injured tone of voice, and with a lip quivering with emotion, said—

"Why, you're not going off like that?"

"No, I'll say good-bye. You weren't hard upon

me when I was with you both, and I'm not too proud yet or too good to shake hands with either of you."

She came back to the counter saying—

"I was looking for an omnibus—any omnibus that goes near the Sou' Western Rail will do. There's late trains on the Wandsworth line."

"Oh, yes; late enough," said Mrs. Wisby, "but pr'aps you'd better drink your sixpenny and be off. I don't know that we've a right to try and stop yer, if you wish to get away. Arter all, every gal to her taste, and no interference. Those who don't like me, I shall never like; those who does I takes to, and sticks to. Sally, dear, did I ever try and throw you off, even when you had the scarlet fever and frightened all the lodgers—did I, now?"

"No, you never did; I will say that for you."

"Then, here's luck to all on us in our various ways," said Mrs. Wisby, taking up her glass, an action instinctively imitated by Nella, "and let the best on us thrive the best, say I."

"Yes, that's fair," said Nella, with a sickly smile by way of return to Mrs. Wisby's convulsive grin across at her; then she drank her ale, set down the glass, turned ghastly white, and stood for a moment swaying slightly and looking intently at the old woman, who watched her with great eagerness.

"You—you've——" began Nella, and then her eyes half closed, and Mrs. Wisby ran at her, took her hand and drew it through her arm, whilst Sally passed round to the other side and offered also her support.

"Yes, it is hot in this place; it's all the gas," muttered Mrs. Wisby, by way of extra precaution as they turned to leave the jug and bottle department of the Regent, but no one noticed any alteration in the customers, and William was leaning half over the counter, on the other side of the partition, flirting desperately with a servant-maid, who had come in for the supper beer.

The three went into the street, turned round the corner away from the lights in the public-house, and went across the way—went on more slowly when they found that Nella Carr was a great weight to support, and was dragged along rather than being capable of any effort to sustain herself.

"It's all right, I s'pose," the girl Sally muttered. "But I never liked this kind of game."

"Oh, it's all right enuf," said Mrs. Wisby. "Round the next corner is a quiet cab or two, which'll take us home. Lor, what a weight she is, to be sure, now; and to think that she was a babby we could carry anywhere once upon a time. I wouldn't carry her now a 'arf a mile for any money, Sally."

"Is that the stand? I don't think she'll last out to it."

"Good lor, I hope she will, though."

They reached the cab-stand, opened the door of the first carriage, and pushed the stupefied girl into it, and when the cabman arrived there was nothing remarkable in three persons in possession of his vehicle, only a great act of injustice in the estimation of the waterman and of the owner of cab number one on the rank, in making this invidious selection.

"Where to, ladies?" asked the cabman, as he shut them in.

"Round towards Westminster—Tothill Street way. I'll tell you when you're going wrong."

The cab drove off, and Nella's head drooped lower and lower till it rested on the shoulder of Mrs. Wisby, who did not offer any objection to the liberty.

"She's clean off now," said Sally, again affirming in an under-tone that she did not like that kind of job.

"Let the air blow on her a bit," responded Mrs. Wisby, "and hold my basket and don't drop the key out. Dear lamb, how tired she must have been with all her travelling to-day!"

CHAPTER THE ELEVENTH.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR.

THREE months after Miss Gifford's dead failure, the Reverend Theobald Gifford preached his farewell sermon to the good people of Wilton. Three months had made a difference in the intentions of the clergyman. He had purchased a valuable living in a distant part of the country, and was now preparing to take Augusta away with him—making the rounds of those friends whom he had found in the place, and paying visits to every member of his flock, rich or poor, before he went away for good.

And now the farewell sermon was preached in Wilton church, with an eloquence and pathos that even astonished Miss Gifford, who knew more of her brother's character than the rest of the world put together. He set aside his starchiness, his formality, his dry, hard tones of voice, which rendered the best parts of his sermon as monotonous as his worst, and he launched forth. Every one could see that the

Reverend Theobald Gifford was sorry to part with his friends; that associations had sprung up from which it was difficult to turn aside; and that he was sorry at the last, intensely sorry, to leave a sphere where his labours had been appreciated and much good had been done.

For the Wilton folk had begun to think at last that the incumbent of Saint James's Church was not such a bad fellow after all. He had been cold and unsympathetic in his way—had told some unpleasant truths, and had not adopted the best manner of telling them. He had been a busy-body, they thought, at one time, and would not allow any one rest; and he had never left off his morning sermon—and this was never forgiven—till ten minutes past one by the clock under the north gallery. But still he had done good; he had persuaded many refractory shopkeepers to put up their shutters all Sunday, despite the business which some of them did in greengrocery and quartern loaves before eleven in the morning; he had spent his money freely amongst them, paid his bills punctually, and given quietly a great deal of his money away amongst those poor folk whom he had not seemed to like much. But now that he was going away, everybody was sorry, and he was as sorry as everybody else. The farewell sermon was preached one

evening in October, then, and he spoke well and earnestly, enjoined the members of his congregation to bear him in remembrance sometimes, and said that he should not forget them in the new field of his labours, but think of the pleasant time of his ministry amongst them, and the kindness he had met from them. There was a great deal of sobbing amongst his flock, and just as his own voice faltered a young lady fainted away in the middle aisle, and created considerable confusion.

If we may be allowed the expression, it was altogether a sensation sermon, and the Reverend Theobald Gifford returned home satisfied with the effect that he had produced, and unduly excited himself to think that that was the last sermon he should ever preach in Wilton.

"If I could have seen what a trial this would have been to me—and to them," he added, with a little natural self-complacency, "I should not have dreamed of leaving here. Who was that fainted this evening in church? I was too short-sighted to see distinctly."

"Oh, Miss Masdale. She *will* faint at awkward times. She is very delicate," said Augusta drily.

"Yes, she is," said her brother; "I have often observed it. I shall be sorry if any words of mine caused her to give way."

"It was the heat of the church, no doubt."

"Ahem—very likely. It was a very hot night for October. I hope they'll like the new incumbent, Gus."

"I hope they will; the new incumbent of Inderstone as well as of Wilton."

"It is beginning life again, and to me it seems going back in the race of life to exchange a busy place like Wilton for a Devonshire village."

"You will have your health better in Devonshire, Theo," said his sister; "and after all, and with the exception of poor old Doctor Rivers, whom do we leave that we regret much?"

"It has been a great trial to me," said Mr. Gifford, "but still life's duties are everywhere the same. And as for friends, why, I dare say that we shall find them, and those who really like us now may take the trouble—who can tell?—of coming in search of us elsewhere."

"Are you talking at me, Theo?" asked Miss Gifford, with a merry little laugh, and perhaps the faintest increase of colour.

"I certainly was thinking of you more than of myself, though this is scarcely a subject that we need discuss to-night."

"Nor at any time," said Augusta, tossing her

head; "for there is no one of whom I shall care to think, or who has a right to think of me."

"N—no; certainly not," said her brother slowly; "but I have fancied that *his* attentions have been a little marked, and I have also fancied——"

"My dear Theo, I will not listen to your fancies. How can you forget that this is Sunday evening—you so punctilious too?"

"Right, my dear; I am justly reprov'd," said Mr. Gifford, taking the latter part of the reply in all seriousness, and not as it was meant. "You must forgive me, Augusta; I have been a little anxious about this, and I suppose that the last few days have preyed upon my mind, and filled me with all kinds of odd thoughts. Moving away for good, and from a place wherein we were born too, is painful, there's not a doubt of it. I am ashamed of myself for giving way to a sentiment, and not bearing this with my usual stoicism. I am put out at my own weakness."

"Never mind, Theo; you will soon get over any sentiment, for you are not a sentimental man. What's that?"

"Why, it is the bell ringing," said her brother. "Surely we are not likely to have any visitors to-night?"

"Doctor Rivers, perhaps?"

"He will come round to-morrow. He knows that I object to seeing friends after service at my house—that I prefer entire rest."

"But this is an exceptional day."

"Yes, but there is no exception to my rule," answered Theobald, "and it is a rule which my friends, whoever they may be, are bound to respect, if they have any respect for me."

At this moment the servant entered, bearing a card which Mr. Gifford took up from the salver with a most contemptuous expression of countenance.

"Mr. George Hewitt," quoted the incumbent. "Really I don't know a Mr. Hewitt that I am aware. Augusta, is the name familiar to you?"

Augusta Gifford shook her head.

"What kind of man is he?" he asked of the servant.

"A kind of a gentleman, sir—not quite a gentleman, perhaps."

"Have you seen him before?"

"No, sir, never."

"This is very extraordinary. Did he state his business?"

"No, sir."

Mr. Gifford felt that this was a liberty, and said with great decisiveness, as he dropped the card upon the table—

"Inform Mr. Hewitt, if you please, that I do not receive visitors on a Sunday on any pretence whatever."

The servant retired, and shortly afterwards re-entered.

"If you please, sir, he says that his business is of very great importance, and that he will not detain you more than one or two minutes."

"Inform Mr. Hewitt, if you please," said Mr. Gifford, in his last tone of voice, and an exceedingly unpleasant one it was, and if he had pitched his farewell sermon in that key he would have "done" for it completely, "that it is not my habit to transact business of any kind on a Sunday, important or otherwise."

The maid withdrew again.

"The man is very pertinacious," said Augusta.
"I wonder what he wants to say."

"Nothing of any consequence save to himself, you may depend," replied her brother.

"Perhaps some poor man or woman is ill in the town."

"Then the man would have said so."

"Perhaps——"

"My dear, how curious you are, to be sure," said her brother tetchily.

"Excuse me, Theo, but I am a woman, and love

a mystery," said his sister; "and I am disposed to think that this man will not go away without seeing you."

"Really, I do not understand how—— Well, what is it now?" he asked sharply, as the maid-servant appeared for the third time.

"If you please, sir, he says that he is compelled to leave for London by the mail to-night, or else he would not have troubled you in this manner."

Mr. Gifford's countenance became a trifle flushed at the stranger's pertinacity, and he said—

"This is exceedingly rude. This approximates, in my opinion, Augusta, to a cool and deliberate insult. Inform Mr. Hewitt, if you please," he said, addressing his servant once more in his highest sharp, "that I regret his intention of violating the sanctity of the Sabbath night by railway travelling, and that he had better write to me to-morrow, or call at a time more befitting when he returns to Wilton."

"My dear Theo," said Augusta, as the door closed once more on the oscillating domestic, "I think that if I had been you I would have asked the nature of his business. We cannot tell what motives may have impelled this man to come here."

"You will see, Augusta, that he will retire now, and that we shall hear no more of him. My own opinion is that he wanted to borrow a little money

to assist him to get to London, and that he has trumped up some extraordinary story to enlist my sympathies. The minister of the place is always the first person on whom to attempt an imposition. He will go away and—— Now, upon my word this is too bad!" ejaculated he, as the servant once more put in an appearance in his drawing-room; "I will bear this no longer. Why do you keep bringing in that man's messages when you know I never see persons on a Sabbath day?"

"Why, if you please, sir, he won't go away."

She did not add that the gentleman without had bribed her with a shilling for the delivery of each message, and had wound up with half-a-crown when the matter had grown serious, and she had become more reluctant to face the head of the establishment; and the reason alleged being satisfactory to the master, possibly there was no occasion to add the second and more cogent one.

"Will not go away," repeated Mr. Gifford. "Oh, we'll soon see about that."

"He says that he really must see you, or the young lady, if you're determined not to grant him an interview," said the servant; "that he is very anxious about a niece of his—Nella, sir—and begs that you will give him all the information that you can."

"Nella!" cried Augusta. "Pray show him in at once. Why did he not say that he wished to speak about her before? Show him in, please. Theo, you do not object, at least, to my seeing this man?"

"You have given your order before asking me, Augusta; how can I possibly object now?" said Mr. Gifford. "It's of no good objecting. What do we know of that poor, wretched girl, that we should be annoyed by her relations like this on a Sunday evening?"

"But if he is anxious, dear?"

"Oh, of course, that is all nonsense," said Mr. Gifford, "that is an excuse to get in. However, it is done now, and you must take the responsibility, Augusta. I wash my hands of it entirely."

"I'll take all the responsibility, Theo."

"I shall remain here for your protection's sake," he said, leaning back in his easy-chair and half closing his eyes, "but I shall take no part in the conversation. Kindly understand that, Augusta, and do not refer to me in any way."

"Very well."

Mr. Gifford had now talked himself into one of his bad-tempered crotchety moods, which he was not likely to get out of till the next morning, his sister knew, and therefore she did not attempt impossi-

bilities. The pertinacious stranger was shown in, and he bowed to Miss Gifford, who returned his salutation, and to Mr. Gifford, who did not, and whose quiescent pose was to be taken for sleep, and not for impoliteness, if the intruder were so pleased to consider it.

“Good-evening, Miss Gifford—good-evening, sir,” he said, as he advanced into the room. “I am sorry if my perseverance has given any offence, but the urgency of the case must plead my excuse.”

He took the chair which Miss Gifford indicated, and then paused for a few moments, as though to consider his best line of action, looking attentively at the lady, and lastly at the gentleman, as though anxious to understand them, or to know them by sight before he addressed them again.

He was a man of forty-two years of age, or thereabouts, above the middle height, square built and powerful, a sun-burnt, keen-eyed man, with huge grey whiskers which hung upon his shoulders. A man who had been handsome in his youth, but whose face was prematurely lined, and from whose head the hair had almost vanished, leaving a little fringe round, which gave him a monkish appearance, and suggested that a cowl and frock would have looked more appropriate upon him than that suit of black.

Miss Gifford was the first to break the silence.

"Sunday evening is not a time at which we receive visitors or transact business; but as you have sent in the name of a girl in whom we took an interest three months since, and who was very ungrateful to us—as you say that she is your niece, and desire all the information concerning her that we can give you, we have, for once, relaxed our rules."

"Thank you, ma'am—thank you, sir."

The person last thanked kept his eyes closed, but his eyelids quivered a little when thus directly addressed.

"We can only tell you, sir, that she left here promising to return to the reformatory at Grayling's, and that she never kept her word."

"She never kept her word! She did not go, then?"

"No."

"Are you sure of that?" he asked eagerly. "Have you received any communication from the principals there?"

"Yes, informing me that she has not returned to the establishment."

"I was almost afraid—— And—and you have not heard from her in any way?"

"Not in any way whatever."

"They must have got hold of her again. They

must have been on the watch for her, and dragged her off to their damned dens!"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the incumbent at this juncture; but the man did not hear him, as he went on speaking very rapidly, and looking down at the rich carpet at his feet.

"As if they could not have let her be—let her had one chance to grow better than she is, and to turn out a bright and honest girl. For there's good in her—there must be—or she would have never come all this way to share her mother's life, and she would have never promised you."

"She was very weak," said Miss Gifford. "The first impression wore off on her journey, and she became afraid of the result of her promise."

"No, she did not," was the flat contradiction.

"How do you know that?"

The man was silent for a moment, and then said—

"By the merest chance I met her in the train, and recognised her."

"You are her uncle, I think you told the servant?"

"Yes, her uncle, Miss Gifford. Her uncle George, who only wishes to be certain that she is honest and deserving—that there is a chance of amendment in her—to take her to his own home and treat her as his daughter."

"Why have you not thought of this before?"

"Because I was abroad, madam, and knew but little of the family. I left England for China before my unhappy sister had married a great scamp, and I have not been in this country three months. During that time I have been searching for my sister, and in the search for her, and in the discovery of her—in her coffin, too—I saw my niece for the first time."

"And then you met her in the train afterwards, going to London?"

"I did, when I thought that I had lost her for good."

"Well, what did she say to you?" asked Miss Gifford.

"I did not tell her that I was her uncle George. I thought that it was precipitate, and might unsettle her," he said, speaking with the same rapidity, as though anxious to get over that part of the subject; "but I gave her a hint that there was such a person in existence, who might befriend her one day. I don't know that she took much interest in the subject, for she imagined that I was a policeman, and so was frightened at me. I felt confident that she was determined on her future step, and therefore I did not accompany her to London, lest she should think that I was her enemy, and had been cajoling her all the way. I got out at the station before the

terminus, and the poor girl's heart was relieved by my departure. Ah, I was sure, too, that that girl meant to go straight."

"Did she speak of me?"

"Yes, of the kindness that you had shown her, and the advice that you had given her to return to Grayling's, to receive her punishment for her flight, and then prepare for the new life which you had promised her. Upon my honour, I could have taken my oath of that girl's resolution; and though I have lately had my doubts, for I have been watching Grayling's, still, I came on, thinking that you had heard from her, and could assure me she was there."

"Then, sir, when you were so near Grayling's," cried Mr. Gifford, rising in his chair and confronting his visitor, "why did you not convince yourself of your niece's absence instead of coming all this way, and disturbing us on a Sunday evening in this manner?"

The man looked steadily at Mr. Gifford, and did not appear to be surprised by this sudden burst of indignation.

"It is easily explained, Mr. Gifford," he said. "I did not wish the people at Grayling's to know that I was a relation of Nella Carr's—I did not wish that girl to know it yet awhile, lest I should disturb her thoughts, and arouse in her hopes which I might

have to dash down at a future period. I may be a very strange man—a very proud and unnatural relation—but my principle was to be a friend to her if she turned out well and showed any self-restraint; and if she gave way, to go back to China and leave her to the misery which she preferred.”

“You left too much to Nella,” said Miss Gifford.

“Pardon me, but I came to London for my sister, not for my sister’s child.”

“Believing, then, that she has gone her own wilful course, you will make no further effort to discover her?” asked Mr. Gifford.

“I am not sure,” was the answer.

“It is your duty to endeavour to find her, I think,” said Mr. Gifford, “although I fear—knowing too well the vacillating nature of the girl—that no satisfactory result can follow any efforts of your own.”

“I can’t go away leaving her to the devil, and knowing what temptations will come to her. I must find her—I will find her, by God! whatever is the consequence!”

He struck his hand upon the drawing-room table in his vehemence, and the fire flashed from his dark eyes, and wholly changed the expression of his face. This was a man whom it was dangerous to confront when aroused—who was not always pleasant company, it was evident.

"Hush, sir!" said Mr. Gifford. "We are not accustomed to outbursts of passion here. If you cannot control them better than this, I fear that you are not a fit custodian for your niece."

"Oh, I would take care of her," he said. "I haven't a friend in the world—I never had one for the matter of that—and I should love that girl if she were faithful and kind to me. I haven't a single tie in the world of any kind now my sister's gone, and I'm not a poor man—I am far from poor."

He said it with a boastful air that was not calculated to give a good impression of his character to his auditors; and this thought suggested itself to him, perhaps, for he became so suddenly calm that the contrast was a striking one.

"If I could only find her," he said in a low tone, "and reason with her on the folly of her present course! I am a stranger to her, but she would listen to me if I told her who I was, perhaps. But it is an intricate business, and I'm not a clever man."

"Can you not take the police into your confidence?" asked Mr. Gifford.

"No, that wouldn't do."

"Offer a reward for her, which might tempt her enemies to give her up."

"No," he answered.

He rose after this, as though tired of the suggestions that were made to him, and said—

“I must think of something of my own, now that you have convinced me she is not at Grayling’s. Thank you, for seeing me, Mr. Gifford—thank you, his sister, for all the good you tried to do and failed in. If there were more earnest souls like you in this hard world, to strive more against the evil which surrounds us all, to give up not too readily, because their objects of interest fell away too soon, what a different balance-sheet of sin and repentance might be kept up there!”

He said it with an energy for which they were unprepared, with his eyebrows lowering over his eyes, which flashed forth again with that fire which said more for the earnestness of the speaker than his words, despite the force with which they were delivered, and the gesticulation by which they were accompanied.

“You speak like a man who feels what he says,” said Mr. Gifford, with more interest.

“I speak like a man who has suffered with the rest of men,” he replied enigmatically.

Then he bowed and moved towards the door, before which he paused with the handle in his grasp.

“If I find her?” he said interrogatively.

“Tell her from me how sorry I was that she did

not keep her word—how disappointed I am at this poor result of all my hopes,” said Miss Gifford.

“That will do no good,” Mr. Hewitt said bluntly. “If I find her, will you and your brother do something for her again—put her with somebody whom you can trust, and give her one more chance? I will pay well.”

“We should be keeping her against the rules of the reformatory—against the law,” said Mr. Gifford.

“No matter; the law is harsh, and not to be respected,” he said, with the past abruptness asserting itself once more. “What do you think, Miss Gifford?”

“You are her uncle, you say that you are her friend; she should be your charge now, if you have not another tie in all the world.”

“Not one,” he said. “I came back to be of help to two whom I had left poor, and I find one dead, and the other worse than dead.”

“Not yet, perhaps. We have no right to think the worst of our fellow-creatures.”

“Bless you, Miss Gifford! no, we haven’t.”

Then this singular being went rapidly out of the house, closed the door behind him, and walked away at a quick pace along the high road and through the town, until he reached the parish burying-ground—an acre of dead poor who were better out

of the world than in it, according to statistics and philosophy.

Here he clambered over the low wall which kept the workhouse graveyard from the high road, and went straight on, regarding nothing in his course—a black figure in the moonlight—till he reached the grave of that poor woman who had died in Mudge-son's show, wondering what would become of Nella, and recking not of that man who, with a groan like a wild beast's, crouched down before her resting-place and covered his face with his hands.

CHAPTER THE TWELFTH.

BANKS'S BENEFIT.

Nor a hundred miles from Westminster Abbey, and in the neighbourhood of Tothill Street, Westminster—indeed, a turning out of a turning in that delightful thoroughfare—stood a suspicious-looking beer-shop, which was supposed to be a house of call for joiners, although no joiners within the memory of man had ever waited for a job there, and no employer of joiners had ever waited for assistance.

It was a house under suspicion as well as a suspicious-looking house, and the police made frequent calls, dropped in unceremoniously, took stock of the ladies and gentlemen in the parlour, asked a few questions, rude, curious, or facetious, as the case might be; now and then persuaded a young lady or gentleman whom they might find there to take a little walk with them in the open air, which walk had the remarkable but invariable sequel of ending at a large establishment where "Police Station" was written over the entrance-doors.

This house was called the Joiner's Arms, kept by one Edward Armstrong, who had been a prize-fighter in his early youth, but had lost his sleight of fist with his obesity. Adjacent to the Joiner's Arms—indeed, connected in the upper floors by a doorway in the party-wall—was the lodging-house of Mrs. Wisby, formerly of Vates Street, a benevolent old lady, who took in the poor and houseless at threepence a night per head, and saw that they were as comfortably located as she could afford, or as they who paid their threepences could expect considering the money.

Had there been respectable people lodging in that particular lane—which was called Joiner's Lane, to match the tavern at the end thereof—they would have been scandalised some evenings, especially Sunday and Monday evenings, by the noise which issued from the bar-parlour about eleven, when its company had taken a fair share of beer and was becoming argumentative; but as the inhabitants of Joiner's Lane were the principal customers of the Joiner's Arms, there was no one to indict the establishment of Edward Armstrong for a nuisance. The whole place was an offence to the neighbourhood, but, as the police philosophically remarked, thieves must live somewhere; and as it was a handy spot to look them up and make a raid upon them when

occasion necessitated so cruel a proceeding, it was left intact, and honest people gave it a wide berth after sundown.

It was a house of call for thieves, if not for joiners. If there was any little job on hand requiring tact, good management, or neat conspiracy, a few of the heads of the profession—none of your half-and-halves, your area-sneaks, or shop-door snatchers—would meet here and pick out their men, and Armstrong was a man always to be relied upon, and so drew custom to his house, and gained the respect of all who knew him.

And possibly it is not too hard upon Mrs. Wisby's establishment to assert that her house was a lodging-house for thieves as well—for thieves out of luck in great-coat seasons, when men were buttoned to the chin, and pockets were difficult to get at, and for thieves who in good luck did not care for any great display, but came regularly and for the sake of appearances to their old quarters. Mrs. Wisby had a little room on the other side of her landing for her pupils, girls of all ages and sizes, who boarded and lodged with her, and were trained systematically to steal, but were never caught training by observant people who looked in, and were connected with the large establishment before alluded to.

Take Mrs. Wisby and her pupils unawares at any

hour of the day or night, and she was always found at needle-work with her apprentices, as she called them, stitching, cutting-out, and planning—making up somewhat dirty bits of stuff, perhaps, but then she lived in a poor neighbourhood, where the dirt caught things quickly. This was the good lady's explanation to the curious folk who called upon her, and probably were more free with their remarks than welcome, though Mrs. Wisby was of an equable temperament, and took not offence at anything.

Sometimes, when work was slack, or the work-girls were tired, or thirsty, or wanted change, they came down in a body into Mr. Armstrong's parlour, and drank beer with the gentlemen, and sang songs to wile the time away, and joined in any chorus that was set going by the convivial souls assembled there. But this was on feast nights, or when some poor fellow in prison wanted a benefit for his wife—to keep her going in the world whilst he was out of it—and not as a general rule at the Joiner's Arms, by any means.

But, on the particular night in October to which we wish to direct the reader's attention, there was a benefit at Mr. Armstrong's, and the parlour was full of men, women, and children, and much foul tobacco-smoke. It was a grand night, and there were a few

strange faces from Whitechapel and Southwark that helped to fill the room—the faces of friends who felt for the trouble of an old pal, and had mustered there like brave men to support him.

The old pal's name was Banks, and Banks's wife's benefit it was. Banks's brother was in the chair, a gentleman who was "just out," and with nothing to answer for; with his hands washed of that last unfortunate little job which had resulted in four years' penal servitude; there he was, as gay as a lark, with his hair cut rather short, and his face somewhat thinner than his companions knew it before bad luck had "bowled him over." Armstrong was in his element, and drawing beer with great rapidity. No police had troubled them that evening, they were all free, easy, and sociable, and it was a wet night outside in the lane, and thus rendered in-doors the more comfortable quarters.

There had been a raffle for one of Banks's handkerchiefs, and a second raffle for something else, the proceeds of which were also to flow to Banks's wife's pocket, and then singing and chorusing had set in with fifty-horse power, and all went merrily onwards with these happy pickpockets.

It was at this juncture, when they were singing, laughing, and smoking their hardest, that two women, with Mrs. Wisby in the rear carrying a

pillow, brought in a tall, pale-faced, hollow-eyed girl between them, and sat her in a corner of the room by the side of a bullet-headed man, who was smoking a short pipe, and hammering his applause upon the table with his beer-mug between every verse of the song which a sentimental youth was singing.

"What, Nella!" cried one woman; "so you've come to enjoy yourself at last, and be cheered up with the rest of us."

"They made me come," said the girl, as she lay back wearily against the pillow, which Mrs. Wisby interposed between the wooden partition and her, "I didn't want to."

"There, it's no use to be continiawally grumbling," said Mrs. Wisby, "or fretting because you aint so strong as you could wish to be. You're coming round all right now, and as fast as possible."

"Yes, I hope so."

"And will be one of us agin—the 'cutest of the lot on us, won't you?"

"What else is there to be now?"

"Well, nothin' much else, that's certin."

"Oh, my!" and Nella Carr heaved a long sigh, and closed her eyes for a few moments, as though the smoke had made them smart.

"What's the matter with the gal?" growled the

bullet-headed fellow who had made room for her at his side. "Is it the white feather that has stuck in her gills and made her narvous?"

"No, it aint that," said Mrs. Wisby; "she'd been on the tramp in the country, and not living reg'lar, and when she come to London—the werry fust night, in fact—she was tooked ill all of a sudden and went clean out of her mind, and hasn't been until last week I may say anythin' more nor a babby. She overdid it."

"Oh, yes, *she* overdid it," said one of the girls with a loud laugh, and nodding her head at Mrs. Wisby; "I think she overdid it, Nella, and lucky for her you're as you are, my dear."

"I think, Sally, that you'd better keep your tongue from clacking on in this fool's fashion," remarked Mrs. Wisby, assuming a severe air, "for no one makes out what you mean, which isn't wonderful when 'arf your time you're mortal silly. And how air you to-night, sir? Any luck?"

"No, I can't get on," replied the man; "it's hard lines jest at present, and back I goes to Birmingham whether it's too hot or cold for me."

"You'll have your bed the same as usual, I suppose?"

"Yes, in the old place, and there's your three-

pence, Mrs. Wisby, and there's the threepence that I owed you last night."

"Bless the man, he pays up like a prince."

"Air you a-going?" asked the man.

"Oh, yes; I'm off," said Mrs. Wisby. "I can't bear all this smoke and clatter, it isn't in my line, and if my 'prentice gals enjoys theirselves that's all I care about. Give me the young uns happy, and I'm as happy as a queen myself; but sour looks like them air," pointing to Nella's face, "I can't abide."

"She shall see them brighter presently," said Sally, as Mrs. Wisby took her departure after flinging this Parthian dart at Nella. "We're not going to mope much longer, are we?"

"Not much longer, Sally."

"What's the good on it?"

"Ah, what's the good on it indeed?"

The song was finished at this moment, and the shouts of applause, the hammerings of hands, and mugs, and sticks upon the table that followed, were deafening. Nella put her fingers to her ears, and turned even a shade paler.

"It makes my head swim, Sally," she murmured faintly.

"You'll be used to it in a minnit," Sally assured her, "it's the fust row, that's all. Here, old man, give her a drink out of your mug, will ye?"

"Don't drink too much then," was the surly answer of the individual whose mug was snatched away from him.

"I'll take care of that, 'cos I wants a dip into it myself," said Sally, and then there was a roar of laughter from those who heard the joke, and saw it carried out, and the bullet-headed man swore at them for the liberty.

"If that's London perliteness," he added sneeringly, "we could show you a bit of manners in Birmingham that'd do some of you gals and boys good. Why, cus it, you haven't left me a drop."

This was a statement which elicited another shout of laughter from the company, and an answer from Sally that it was all the better for trade.

"Ay, all the better for trade, but when a man's hard up," he said ruefully, "what's to be done then?"

"Go on tick till the good luck comes."

"Well, that's not bad advice."

"Order there. Mr. Pottinger will obleege us with a song."

"Bravo, Pottinger!" cried several of Pottinger's friends; and then Mr. Pottinger burst forth from his place at the table, and flourished his long clay pipe about in his right hand to the imminent risk of the eyesight of his next-door neighbour, who dodged

it adroitly, and did not spoil the song by any remonstrance with the singer.

It was a comic song—a song with a great deal of slang in it, and more ribaldry—an awful song for decent folk to listen to, but one at which no one was surprised in this place, and at which no woman blushed. A moderate song, even, was it for the Joiner's Arms, accompanied by what Sally called a rattling chorus, that made the windows rattle in their sashes as though joining in it too.

Nella smiled once or twice, for the man was irresistibly comic in his action, and once she laughed loudly with the rest, and Sally, sitting by her side, shook her in a playful manner by the arm.

"Bravo, Nella, you're looking up, my gal! Didn't I tell you that to-night would do you good?"

"Yes, you did."

"You're not sorry you've come now?"

"Oh, what have I to be sorry for?" cried Nella desperately. "What's the odds of the like of me ever being sorry for anything ever more? There, Sally, you needn't watch me like a cat does a mouse for fear I should run away; I've nowhere to run to now, and I'm one of you again."

"You mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it. Let us have some more beer, with the gin in it this time, if I'm strong enough to

stand the gin yet. I don't know, I'm not quite sure."

"If you aint used to it, I wouldn't touch gin," said the man from Birmingham. "You've been ill, and it'll knock you over clean."

"Do you think it will?"

"I'm sure it will."

"You seem to be mighty sure and mighty wise," said Nella scoffingly. "Sally, get the ale and gin. I don't mind this fellow—I don't mind anything to-night. I'm contrary, and go clean against all advice—that's like a gal of my age, isn't it?"

"It's like a fool," was the plain answer.

"I am a fool—I always was a fool," cried Nella, "and so people got the best of me, and talked me over. But they won't do that again, good uns or bad uns, for I just please myself. Sally, get the ale, do."

"With the gin in it?" said Sally doubtfully.

"Oh, yes, with the gin in it. I'm going on for fifteen years of age, and am not afeard of gin. What a capital song this is, old fellow; but what a row they make over it. Hanged if my head isn't swimming again!"

"Go into the lane and get a bit of fresh air, then," said the man.

"Oh, yes, they'll let me do that, certainly. They

think I want to get away from them, and they're all eyes, right and left."

"And you don't want to get away?"

"No, not now."

"Why not now? Blest if you aint the oddest girl that ever I come across," said the Birmingham man, becoming interested. "Why not now?"

"Because it's no use. I should only get locked up again—caught at once, and that would kill me off, for I'm awfully weak yet."

"You might light on a friend."

"Yes, that's uncommon likely," was the ironical rejoinder.

The man lowered his voice as the company raised theirs in one general howl over the last chorus.

"Fancy that I'm one—here to help you," he said quickly and earnestly; "that I've been watching to save you from all this for days and days, and that I think the chance is now or never."

"Who—who are you, then?" cried Nella eagerly.

"The man who travelled with you from Wilton to London more than three months ago."

"The—the detective?"

"No, your friend—your mother's brother, who kept straight when all the rest went wrong. Trust me, Nella; I've come to save you."

"Oh, don't say any more! Let me think, please let me think!" cried Nella.

CHAPTER THE THIRTEENTH.

NELLA MAKES UP HER MIND.

“LET me think, please!”

It was the wild appeal of one who had been despairing of all hope. She had been baffled in her first feeble efforts to rise. The question of what the world was thinking of her—the world of Wilton, which consisted of Theobald Gifford and his sister—appalled her, and rendered her despair akin to desperation. She had been a prisoner for weeks; her money was gone; everybody thought the worst of her, and no one was likely ever again to believe a word that she said: let her give up, and go wrong, as so many like unto her had done before her day.

She could not see any hopes ahead, and the old life was around her, and was—poor reasoner—such easy living after all. There was no one to believe in her, she had thought as she came into the Joiner's Arms that night; and then a fitful gleam of something better and brighter had fallen athwart

the Cimmerian darkness in which she was enwrapped, and dazzled her with its strange suddenness.

"Think away, Nella," said the man in a low voice, "but think quickly."

But Nella was too confused to reflect deliberately as to the consequences that might follow the appearance of her uncle George in that place. Here was a chance of escape for her; one friend, perhaps, at her elbow—though he might prove a tyrant, and be awfully good and awfully hard—and it might be just possible to steal away from the old school, and be never heard of more by those who had entrapped her.

George Hewitt watched her furtively and anxiously. The minutes were precious to them both; Sally would soon be back with the ale and gin, Mrs. Wisby would look in again to make sure that her pupils were behaving creditably, and doing justice to the pains she had taken with them; people who had their eyes upon the girl, and were more likely to assist Mrs. Wisby than Nella, were around them both, and were not likely to lose sight of them for long together.

One man was suspicious of them already, or at least saw something novel in the thoughtful position of Nella—tracing with her finger strange hieroglyphics on the beer-stained table—and in the silent

figure near her, with his face full of a new interest, to which the visitors at the Joiner's Arms had not been a witness hitherto.

"I say," he shrieked from the other end of the room, "what's the row with Brummagem? Is he making love to Nella, and trying to cut the rest of us out?"

"I've had enough of women, thank you," cried Hewitt, with bitter irony. "I was thinking of a song that'd please you boys—an old song, that I learned in Australy, from a pal who was lagged for life, poor wretch. Joe Barker's song."

"I remember Joe Barker," said a grey-haired man, from the other side of the room; "one of the best of fellers; he never stuck at nuffin, and was allers game."

"Ah, he was," said Hewitt, "and if he hadn't stuck the Bobby in the back, in that Saint Pancras pawnbroker's job, he might have been here now. Well, this is his song, ladies and gemmen, and if it's strong and full of seasoning, why, you must blame old Joe, not me. By your good leave, my gal," he said, addressing Nella, "you'll move a little more out of my way, for there's a dance in it, and I allers get excited over Joe's song. Ah, Joe was a brick, poor feller."

Nella regarded him with amazement. This was one of "the lot" then; a man who understood

thieves, and was, after all, a thief himself, perhaps; even his voice had changed, and was thick and husky in its utterance. She rose to make room for him, and amidst the applause which followed Mr. Hewitt's intention to favour the company with a song, he said in a low tone again—

“At the end of the third verse go out of the place, and wait for me at the top of the lane. For your mother's sake, Nella, remember.”

Then he cleared his throat, and dashed at once into his song—a song in praise of everything that was bad, and which only such a character as the unlucky Joe Barker could have taught him. The song would have disarmed the suspicions of the most distrustful; no one could have sung it with that zest whose experience had not lain in dark places, and who had not been surrounded by things evil all his life. It was a defiance to all that was good, pure, and sacred; it scoffed at everything, it was full of oaths and blasphemy—the seasoning for which half an apology had been offered before the commencement of the ditty.

Nella remained at the door, bewildered by this frantic outburst of the Birmingham man; by his excitement, which led him to beat time with his hands upon the table, set him on his feet, indulging in a savage kind of dance, and stamping furiously,

and filled his eyes with a fire which it was impossible to feign. Could she trust herself with this man? Was he not worse than all the rest of them? Could it be possible that that half-mad, coarse-minded wretch had spoken of her future—reminded her of her mother, herself, and her God?

"What does it all mean?" she whispered; and then the voice of Sally behind startled her.

"My eye, Nella, the old man's going it a bit. Has he been drinking since I left him?"

"No," was the slow reply.

"Screwed he is though. Can't he sing? What a row he makes!"

"Yes," Nella answered this time.

"Here's the ale with the gin in it. Take a sip, Nella."

"Presently; put it down upon the table there."

"What are you standing here for?"

"I catch the draught from the door; I feel queer."

"All right, then; stop here a bit, my gal. This is a jolly night, aint it, and better than Grayling's shop?"

"I should think it was."

The third verse was concluded, and whilst the chorus was supporting Mr. Hewitt, the singer's face changed as he looked towards Nella for an instant, and Nella felt that she might trust the man playing

there the strangest of parts, and playing it so well that those whom he imitated did not see the mask upon him.

He wiped his forehead with his handkerchief, whilst still stamping with his feet and flourishing his hands about—one of which, for an instant, beckoned Sally towards him.

“Oh, he wants the ale, does he. Well, I think he may have a drink, for he’s earned it, Nella, with all that blessed ranting.”

She pushed her way through the tables and the company towards him, and Nella knew that now she must steal away or never; felt that her uncle—if this man was really her uncle—was watching her for all his acting, and praying that she would leave the place,

She backed from the door into the narrow passage as the fourth verse began, and Sally, open-mouthed, dropped into a seat to listen to the rest of the song—from the passage into the dark lane, where the air felt cool, and the heavy raindrops were fresh and invigorating, and gave her new life and courage.

Slowly but steadily up the lane, keeping to the shadow of the houses whereon the light from the Joiner’s Arms did not fall, and standing at last at the entry, looking back at the den from which she had emerged.

Yes, it was behind her ; she had passed from it again, and she felt that there was light beyond there, far away out of the dark streets whence he would take her, if possible. It was the beginning of the new life even then, and her guide was a brave, strong man, who had risked much, and was anxious to save her for the sake of one who had died, believing that there was hope for the little girl at Grayling's.

The rain fell steadily, but it came from heaven, and cooled her feverish imaginings. She stood apart once more from the old life, and that thought seemed to give her strength for all the mystery hanging before her like a curtain, which her weak hands could not draw aside.

She shuddered as the uproar from the Joiner's Arms welled forth into the lane with greater distinctness ; there was a general shout of delight, much hurrahing and hammering of hands and beer-mugs on the table—the song was ended ; the man from Birmingham was a great success, and deserved high honours for his humour and spirit. He would be at her side in a moment or two she was sure, and those moments were heavy laden, and would not come to an end for all her sanguine belief in his advancement.

She looked back once or twice, and at last a

something stood between her and the light at the bottom of the lane—the figure of a thick-set man of middle height, who approached her rapidly, bare-headed, and swinging his tattered cap in his right hand.

It was he for whom she waited, and she went a step or two towards him, and put her hand in his trustingly.

“I am ready. I am going with you.”

“That’s well,” he answered. “You are strong, then, Nella—you are strong enough to go away, without one regret for all that accursed life behind us?”

“Yes. I never wanted to go back to it; they made me.”

“I know it,” he said. “May they die, the wretches, no better than they have lived—that is all the good that I can wish them. Great heaven! how I have suffered to-night!”

He passed his hand with the cap in it once or twice across his forehead in his new excitement, and Nella could see, even in the shadows there, the great beads of perspiration thick upon him, as upon a man who had overtaxed his strength.

“Let us go away,” whispered Nella, very anxious now.

“You trust me, knowing so little of me, but

believing all that I have told you? That is a good sign, Nella, for the future; and in the future what may you and I be to one another?—almost like father and daughter, if you keep strong and have faith in me to the last. A hard, cross-grained, suspicious man in many things you will find me, Nella, but I shall like you, and you must bear with me. This way.”

They went out of the lane together into the street, a degree less narrow; they were close upon Tothill Street, when some one came running after them, calling Nella’s name, and dashing towards them recklessly through the deep puddles in the middle of the road, along which the pursuer took her way.

It was Sally who overtook them—who stood before them as though she would bar their further progress with the arms which she outstretched.

“Stop this game. I see the dodge now, and it won’t do.”

“What won’t do?” said Mr. Hewitt quietly.

“You are going to take her away from us, and she don’t want to go,” cried Sally. “I like the gal, and she’s my pal, not yourn. Nella, it’s a plant to ’tice you into another school, that’s all. He’s as bad as any of us. They know him at the Joiner’s Arms at last, and say——”

“Go back,” thundered the man’s voice in her

ears, "before I strike you down. I came to save her soul, not to sink it, woman; you know nothing of me, or of what I am. Stand back, before I lose my temper quite."

"I shan't."

But Sally staggered back several paces with his uncourteous thrust at her, and leaned against the wooden shutters of a little shop, and panted very much.

"Oh, don't hurt her," cried Nella, "she has been always kind to me."

"I am sorry, then," said her protector hastily; "here is money—two five-pound notes for what you have done for Nella. See if you can't begin a different life with them—a something honest, girl—it's not so hard at your age."

"But you, you——"

"No matter what I am," he said. "Be off now, and don't watch us: we are going away for good from here."

"I don't understand, I can't make it out. What will Mother Wisby say?"

"Tell her that Nella has run away, that's all."

"With you?"

"No, not with me—not with anybody whom you know. There, I have paid you well for lying, and lying is easy work with you."

"And you mean to tell me," said the girl, coming closer to him again, "that this is for Nella's good?"

"Yes."

"That you take her away from all that might make her in time like one of us; that this is your dodge—honour, now?"

"Yes, that is my dodge. To make her honest and respectable, to save her from the ruin to which you would persuade her."

"No, no, I would not persuade her," said Sally; "I'm not so bad as that, if she wants to get away. Only I did not see that she could do anything better than become one of us, and it wasn't likely that I should fancy you would act right by her, and take trouble with her. For I know now what you've been. Old Stacey recollects you."

"Old Stacey knows nothing about me. He has been drunk all the evening, and takes me for somebody else. There, I am Nella's uncle—that's the truth of it; and now, keep my secret for Nella's sake, and bid the girl good-bye and good luck."

Sally looked wistfully at Nella, who turned towards her uncle as to a man whose powers to save her from evil were illimitable.

"Oh, save her too, sir—take her away with us, and let her grow good with us."

"Impossible," he muttered.

"I don't want his help," said Sally doggedly, though she had for an instant looked as eagerly as Nella into the strange man's face. "I'm not certain that I want his money, and am a deuced good mind to tear the flimsies up, and throw the bits at him. I'm too old for this game—too happy where I am—too knowing to be preached at. It's a stale idea, and it won't wash. Good-bye, Nella; you're in luck's way, I hope. I'll think of you sometimes, my gal, and larf my hardest to think how Mother Wisby was done, with all her artfulness. It's as good as any play I ever seed."

"Bid her good-bye, Nella: we are not safe yet."

"Good-bye, Sally. Get away from them like me."

"Oh, yes," was the ironical reply, "lots of that game. It would pay so well."

She turned away from Mr. Hewitt and his niece, and went along the middle of the road, back to her old life, slowly but steadily, like one whose mind was made up to the worst. Meanwhile, uncle and niece passed into the broader ways of life, and into the brighter light which met them there.

BOOK II.—THE BETTER LIFE.

CHAPTER THE FIRST.

FOUR YEARS AFTERWARDS.

IN the heart of Huntingdonshire, fair, fat county of meadow-land and woodland, there stood—and stands—a village called Deeneford. A pleasant village it was to an artist's eye, irregular and picturesque, with green hills shutting it in on one side, a thick plantation close upon it on another, whence pheasants and partridges issued at all seasons and made havoc with the farmers' crops, and a bright river meandering through the landscape, and spanned here and there with quaint stone bridges. The whole population of Deeneford did not make up two thousand at the time of our story, though Deeneford not only included the inhabitants of the thatched cottages, but took within its pale the owners of the various farms in the vicinity, and the possessors

of the great mansions for a few miles round it. Deeneford was a quiet village, that had made little progress since its christening, and was still ten miles from any railway station. There was not much doing there, save in harvest time amongst the farmers and the farming population, and in September and later in the season, when shooting and hunting began, and those who lived in the great houses had much company down from London, and for awhile filled the place with life.

Nearly four years after the escape of Nella Carr from the Joiner's Arms, in the month of July, when harvesting was being thought about again, there were more stir and bustle in the village, and more excitement amongst its naturally sleepy inhabitants, than had been known for years. Two events had occurred with extraordinary rapidity upon one another—the sale of the snug living of Deeneford, and consequently the arrival of the new rector, in the first place; and in the second, the taking of the Upland Farm—where death had been busy with its late owner—by a new man, a stranger to the county, but who, report said, was a rich farmer from Australia, well up in farming matters, and so likely to do well in Huntingdonshire.

People in the county were envious of these two good things into which strangers had dropped by the mere weight of their money-bags; they had been outbid, and the rich living and the rich farm went away from the aborigines into the hands of those who a few weeks since had had no interest in Deeneford, and perhaps had never heard of the place.

The living in Deeneford, to begin with, was a rich living—plenty to receive in various ways, and but little work for the high rate of wage, unless the new rector should be disposed to put himself more out of the way than his predecessor had done. The Upland Farm of Deeneford was a rich farm, boasting its thousand acres, all lying in the best part of the district away from the lower ground, which was somewhat marshy in the winter time, and possessing only one field which bordered on a plantation where game was troublesome and ravenous. They were two good things, in fact, the living of Deeneford and the Upland Farm, and there was no small curiosity amongst the inhabitants to see the new owners of these valuable properties. It was a somewhat singular coincidence that both rector and farmer—and rector's and farmer's belongings—arrived by the same train at Kliston, where were waiting a post-chaise for the clergyman and family, and a stout

and somewhat showy dog-cart for the farmer and the niece he had brought with him.

The clergyman, no less a personage than the Reverend Theobald Gifford, glanced at the farmer as he passed with his new wife and his sister to the post-chaise which awaited him, and the farmer—a certain Mr. Hewitt, whose acquaintance we have already made—took stock of the rector, as he walked with his niece towards his dog-cart. The farmer recognised the clergyman, but not the clergyman the farmer: in their one meeting together Mr. Gifford had kept his eyes shut for three-fourths of the time, and had tried to stifle all interest in Mr. Hewitt, who, however, had forgotten nothing, and was vexed to meet one he knew in his first step towards home.

His was not the only recognition either, for his niece had uttered a cry of surprise, which she had instantly suppressed as he looked eagerly, almost beseechingly towards her, and this had added to his discomfiture, and given a shade or two of gloom to his face, which brightened not in his drive towards the farm.

He was very silent, till his niece by his side broke the spell that seemed upon him.

“ You are sorry for this,” she said in a low voice; “ and yet, after all, what is there to be sorry for ? ”

"I came here to escape them, Nella—I chose the quietest and dullest of English villages to settle down in, away from any one who had ever known you or me, and the faces that we sought to shun crowd upon us in the first moment of our coming here."

"But we were not recognised."

"How long is that ignorance to last?"

"For ever, perhaps, for we have changed a great deal in four years, and Mr. Gifford and his sister have not. I was a wild girl then—one Nella Carr, whom they did their best to save from the streets; now I am Eleanor Hewitt, your adopted daughter."

"Yes, my adopted daughter, that is true enough; and I must never call you Nella in company, lest the name should spread, and get in some odd way to those people's ears, who might remember her they tried to save—whom they would have saved if it had not been for Mother Wisby."

"Oh, don't speak of her, or of that time," said Nella sharply.

"It is apart from us, it is for ever in the background, and I did wrong to mention it. You must not mind me, Nella," he said, looking earnestly into her face. "I am a rough fellow, as you know."

"I am a rough girl too at times, you say, as if the

old nature stuck to me still a little," returned the young woman at his side, as her handsome face—and it was very handsome now—was turned towards him for an instant full of gratitude and love, "but you are the best of men."

"If you think so, I don't mind what any one else says," he answered; "but don't jump too hastily at conclusions, girl—you who know so little of me after all."

"What do I not know?"

"What I am away from you—what I was before I knew you."

"Ah, that's not of much consequence," she said with a laugh, to which he did not respond; indeed, his face might have been seen to shadow more had she looked at that moment more attentively into it.

"Patience, Nella, before we sing to each other's praises," he added after a somewhat lengthy pause; "we have only known each other for a little while in the holidays when I fetched you from the big school, and when we were both inclined to overlook each other's faults in the gladness of our meeting."

"But school is over for good."

"And now we shall begin to understand each other, and to like one another, Nella," he said, still gloomily.

"As if we did not like one another already—as if I could ever forget all that you have done for me."

"Oh, that's nothing. There was a mighty deal of selfishness at the bottom of that, and I wanted some one to take care of a lonely, ill-tempered fellow, on the wrong side of forty years of age. Let us drop the subject, and talk about these Giffords again. Whatever has brought them to Deeneford? whom have they come to visit? and, after all, in what way are they likely to affect us? Did you see his sister?"

"Yes, bless her, I should have known her anywhere," said Nella. "I was not likely to forget that face, the angel's that it might have been—that it was—to me. But she has had no cause to remember me in any way, and you need not fear, uncle, that in the woman of eighteen—close upon eighteen, recollect—is to be seen the ragged girl she met on Wilton Heath. She will not point at me, and say, 'I knew you once.' That isn't likely."

"Well, well, perhaps not," he said more assuringly. "You have changed marvellously, I must own that, though you are abrupt at times, terribly abrupt. I should have hardly known you myself had we not met for four years, and yet I am proud of my

memory for faces that have once confronted me. But am I changed as much as you?"

"Well, not quite so much, perhaps."

"I will shave off these grey whiskers to-morrow again; that operation makes a difference in me—I did it when I came to Joiner's Lane after you, and you did not know me till I told you who I was. Whiskerless and older by four years, and with not a bad habit of changing my expression of countenance when the humour seizes me, I shall deceive these Giffords, if they cross our path by accident. I wish," he said, after a moment's further consideration of the aspect of things, "that I had not stuck so long to the name of Hewitt, or taken the farm in that name."

"They are not likely to have treasured your name for four years."

"No, that's true. I am more hopeful now," he said, whipping his horse into a brisker pace; "I'll think no more of it—I'll see no troubles advancing with the first day's march to the new life that awaits us both; the life to which we have looked forward, Nella, as to a life of peace and rest, after the storms we have known and have suffered from."

"But you——"

"But I have suffered too, in my way, though I have made money in the midst of suffering, girl, and

that money sets a home round me for the first time for many years. While thanking God that I am not poor, I also thank Him for almost all the misery that I have known. That's odd now."

He was silent for the next three miles of the journey, and Nella did not seek to arouse him from his reverie. There were thoughts of her own that were difficult to escape from, and it was strange that on the very threshold of her new life there should be encountered those whom she had met in the old. Uncle and niece had resolved to live apart from all that had appertained to the past, and lo, the past seemed not so far away, with the Giffords for neighbours in the fair village of Deeneford. She was not so fearful of recognition as her uncle was; four years had made a woman of her, a tall, dark-haired, dark-eyed woman, with a face to which hard study—and she had studied harder in the four years than any one had dreamed of save herself—had lent an earnest expression, but still was not answerable for all the thought upon it. It was a sad as well as a thoughtful face, and though, when the smiles crossed it, the light was very bright upon it, still the smiles came not often there—were kept down, perhaps, by the bitter knowledge of what she had been, of the bitter necessity of holding that knowledge back from the respectable society in which she was to mix. When

Mr. Hewitt spoke again, it was of the scenery around them, of the twilight that was deepening on the landscape, and which rendered following the farm-servant on his horse ahead of them—their guide for the nonce to the farm, and the man who had waited for them at the railway station—a task of some difficulty.

“If we miss our man it does not matter much,” said Mr. Hewitt, “for I know my way home as well as he does. That is another phase of the memory of which I am proud, Nella—to follow a route one day, and never to forget it afterwards. Every turn of this place is as familiar to me as though I had been born here. I suppose I am indebted for this faculty to my foreign life, when to miss one’s way, to be mistaken in one’s observation of a tree, a gap, a rock, was to be lost for days, perhaps for ever.”

“What a life of incident yours must have been, uncle,” said Nella. “When the long winter nights come on, you will have many stories to relate of your adventures, whilst I work and listen at your side.”

“Yes, perhaps,” he answered, after a pause. “But as my life was a desolate one, Nella, there is not much amusement to be evolved from it, I fancy. This is the last village before we reach our own, and then the farm on the hill-side and the home

where we are going to settle down, and love each other."

"Yes," answered Nella confidently.

Through the village at a brisk pace, and then another drive along a country road until Deeneford was reached, and the moon was high in the heavens shining down upon it. It looked like a place where peace awaited them; all was still and restful, and the river meandering through the landscape seemed like a strip of silver in the distance. There were heavy masses of trees that gave relief and shadow to the scene, which had been steeped in moonlight otherwise, and amidst the cottages, which dotted the landscape there shone forth little flecks of light significant of Deeneford folk being up and stirring still.

"I hope I shall like the place," murmured Mr. Hewitt, "I thought that I should some weeks since, but I don't know now."

"It is a pretty place to like."

"Yes, but the night depresses me, though I do not usually give way to any nervous feeling like a woman. I suppose the Gifford lot have upset me for awhile; though what have they to do with you or me, Nella?"

"Nothing, now."

"Nothing now, of course," added Mr. Hewitt;

"we don't want their help, their sermons, or their friendship. We don't want anything to do with them."

"No," answered Nella thoughtfully, "we are better by ourselves."

A bend of the road, a change in the landscape; Deeneford Church, an old stone edifice, with a tower in lieu of a steeple, ivy grown and green, stood facing them, and beyond it was the parsonage, a grey stone, spacious mansion, up which the ivy was creeping too, as though it flourished in that district and clung to everything.

The post-chaise was before the door still, and the post-boy was at that very moment drinking deeply from a mug that a servant had brought out to him.

"We are not very far behind them," said Nella.

"No; this is a good mare—my predecessor was a judge of horses, and I have not made a bad bargain by buying up his stock," was the answer. "But do you see the church close to that house there?"

"Yes."

"The house is the rectory, no doubt, and Mr. Gifford has come here for good. Well, we are not church-goers, Nella, but humble chapel folk, so we shall not trouble him, or be troubled by his hair-splitting sermons. I was told long ago that he was

more argumentative than earnest. I heard one of his sermons in Wilton, where your mother died."

"Poor mother," whispered Nella.

"Poor woman, who forgave nothing," was the strange answer, "and was inclined always to think the worst of every one—except of you. Perhaps it is best that she should be lying in a pauper's coffin at peace with all the world, for she might not have trusted you or herself with me."

"Not with her own brother?"

"I don't know—I think not. We never agreed; I was always a bit of a brute, who would have my own way, and she thought the worst of me, as she had a right to do at that time. There, I don't want to make myself out any better than I was. And yet, if she had lived to see me come back, the man who was grieved for her griefs, all might have been very different."

He lashed his horse unmercifully the instant afterwards, although the mare, which he had lately commended, had not slackened her pace in any way, and at a rattling pace, that overtook the guide and nearly run him down, they went up the rising ground and reached the Upland Farm—a low, long house, with a garden full of flowers round it, divided from the roadway and the meadows in the rear by a high privet hedge.

"There, this is home—this is what I used to fancy when I was abroad," said Mr. Hewitt, with a sigh of relief, "only your mother was to have been one of us, too—if I could have persuaded her. Surely I should have done that for all her inflexibility."

"You were fond of my mother?"

"Ay, I suppose I was," he said, more coldly. "Don't keep talking of your mother like this."

"Why, it was you, uncle."

"Was it?" he said dreamily. "Well, I will not talk of her again, for she makes my heart sink somehow, and bygones are bygones, and a man is a fool—an accursed fool," he said, almost savagely, "to look back upon them. Here, Nella," he added, in a deep sorrowful tone that thrilled his listener, "comes peace to you and me, or it comes not at all. For two-and-forty years I seem to have been waiting for it, and now it is very near, I hope."

He assisted her to dismount, and was standing, whip in hand, at her side in the roadway before the open gates, where were two farm-servants with lanterns ready to light them along the long gravel walk towards the entrance porch, when a new figure came upon the scene—a gentleman from the farmhouse itself, who was smoking a cigar as he advanced leisurely along the path towards them.

"Who is this?" asked Mr. Hewitt sharply, "coming out of my own house as though it belonged to him? Are these Deeneford manners, I wonder?"

The new-comer, who was a tall man, raised his hat by way of salutation to the farmer, who instinctively imitated his example, though his features did not change from the severe air that they had suddenly assumed.

"Mr. Hewitt, I presume?" said the gentleman courteously.

"Yes, sir," was the short response.

"I have been waiting half an hour for you," he said, in a deep and even musical voice, "at the request of my aunt, who was anxious that some one should be here to welcome you to your new home. A fancy of hers which you may consider somewhat unnecessary, and which, under those circumstances, I will ask you to excuse."

The politeness of this gentleman did not exercise its proper effect upon Mr. Hewitt, for he said more brusquely still—

"Who is your aunt, then?"

"Mrs. Martin, of Deeneford Hall."

"Oh, indeed," he answered, "the lady from whom I hold the farm. Thank you," he added, after a pause, as though he had been considering for awhile whether the attention that had been paid him was

worth thanking the gentleman for, or not. "I had half expected to see Mrs. Martin's agent, not her or you."

"My aunt desired me to add, Mr. Hewitt, that if there was anything you required, or had forgotten, you might rely upon the resources of the Hall, which is close upon you, as you are aware."

"Yes, a great deal too close," answered Mr. Hewitt, "considering what a deal of land there is about. It was foolish to build my farm within a hundred yards of your great house—foolish and unnecessary."

"The late Mr. Martin farmed the place himself at one time. It was a strange hobby, which I could never understand," said the gentleman. "But I am keeping you and your daughter"—he raised his hat again to Nella—"in the night air. There are no commands for me then?"

"Not any—thank you," Mr. Hewitt added again, with a jerk of gratitude.

"Then good-evening, Mr. Hewitt."

"Good-evening, Mr. Martin."

"It's not of any great consequence, perhaps," he said, "but my name is Essenden."

"What name did you say?" said Mr. Hewitt quickly; then, before the impulse could be restrained, he snatched the lantern from the hand of the serving

man near him, and held it close to the face of the gentleman.

It was the fresh-coloured, handsome face of a man of six-and-twenty years of age, with a long fair moustache shadowing his lips, with long fair whiskers hanging almost to his shoulders, and with large blue eyes, which opened a trifle wider with astonishment at Mr. Hewitt's unceremonious proceeding, but did not flinch at the glare of the light upon them.

"I said Essenden," the gentleman replied.

"Oh, I thought you said something else. I don't know you," added Mr. Hewitt. Then he gave back the lantern, and after opening the gate, went at a sharp pace towards his own house.

When Nella had followed him and entered the farm parlour for the first time, she found her uncle sitting with his elbows on the table, and his hands supporting his chin, staring fiercely at the opposite wall.

"Is anything the matter, uncle George?" she asked, leaning over him, and looking into his swarthy, sunburnt face.

"I wish I hadn't come here, that's all," he answered gloomily.

CHAPTER THE SECOND.

THE FIRST CALL.

THE following morning Mr. Hewitt was himself again. He no longer wished that he had not rented a farm at Deeneford, but congratulated himself on his possession, and on the fine thing that it was for him. He was the occupier of a thousand acres of the best land in England, and farming was likely to be profitable with him, for he was a shrewd, clever fellow, who knew what could be got out of land as well as any man who had been farming all his life. In some part of the world—certainly not in China—he had had a great deal to do with land, or else he had studied a great deal from books, which would have rendered him, however, more theoretical and less practical; he was well up in soils, subsoils, and crops, and before the day was out he was quick to arrange his plans, and map out his various fields to their best advantage. He was in his element too, and thoroughly at home; one could see that he had not dashed hap-hazard at farming, as people who

have made money by trade do sometimes to their cost, but that farming was his forte, and would answer with him.

He took stock of his cattle, his sheep and horses, and trotted round his land on a sturdy cob, and gave his orders as though he had been master there for years. His bustling, energetic nature had found full play at last, and though there was always a stern, if not fierce expression on his countenance, still the men felt that they should like the new master presently, if already convinced that they would not have much of their own way whilst he was within ear-shot.

"The life will suit me, Nella," he said to his niece, at the early dinner-hour of one, after his first ride round his land. "If the people will leave us to ourselves, and not be too officious with their visits, all will go smoothly enough. Thank goodness, it's a stiffish pull up-hill here, and when the people understand me, which will not take long, I don't think that they will care a great deal about running after me. The more we have this place to ourselves, the better, girl."

"Yes, that is true,"

"Then there will come no one to fling in our faces the ugly past, which we are trying to live down."

"Thank you," said Nella.

"What for?"

"You are always kind, uncle," said Nella, "You share my past disgrace as though it was part of yours too."

"You are part of me—the only one belonging to me in the world. There is no separating our past, and your discovery would be my shame as well as yours."

Nella wrung her hands quickly but silently together. Yes, it would be the shame of both of them, and lead the finger of scorn to be pointed at them both, and the people at Deeneford to distrust them. She must accept isolation from her kind as part of her new life, and never be like other and more innocent girls of her age. She was thankful and grateful for her escape; it was for ever impossible to step back to the shadows from which she had emerged, and her heart had not any great troubles—any deep regrets—to stir it to its depths. For ever after this the quiet life—hiding away as it were from the turmoil of the city, even from the loves, joys, sorrows of human kind—aloof from everything, at peace and at rest. It seemed a happy life then, but then the past was not quite four years apart from this, and was, in contrast to her present existence, like a view of hell from heaven.

She was a thoughtful girl, if an abrupt one, for she had read a great deal in the last four years, and her uncle had seen her liking for books, and put good works of all kinds in her way. There was something to be learned, he thought, from every earnestly written volume, and he was glad to see that Nella loved books for their own sake, and was seldom apart from them. He had fitted up a library in the farm-house, and there she was to read and be happy with those silent, eloquent companions whilst he was away from her. Presently there might come a change to this life, but he would not tell her of it, or lead her to think of it by any hint of his own. If she could only be happy with him—and with him alone—so much the better. Let the experiment be tried for her sake as well as his; he believed it was for the best.

The first day passed without any visitors, and Mr. Hewitt, whose original nature was mayhap a sanguine one, began to hope that he would be left to himself at the Upland Farm. The great people would not patronise him, and the fine gentleman who had turned up yesternight would possibly and kindly inform "his set" that the new farmer was a boor of a fellow, who did not care for the condescending manners of his superiors. As for his equals, his brother farmers in the vicinity, and so forth, why,

he should meet them at market in due course, and only at market, if he could help it.

But on the second day, his hopes of being left to himself were somewhat dashed down by the advent of the Reverend Theobald Gifford, who made his appearance at the hour of four in the afternoon. Mr. Hewitt had had a walk in his meadows after dinner, and had just returned to smoke a quiet pipe in his parlour, when the late incumbent of Wilton was seen advancing along the garden path.

"Oh, uncle, it's Mr. Gifford," cried Nella. "I am so glad—I am so sorry."

"Glad, and sorry too, girl, What do you mean by that?"

"Glad that he has been thoughtful enough to think of us; sorry for your sake that he *has* thought of us," she added.

"It's a poor explanation, but let it pass," said Mr. Hewitt thoughtfully. "Now, Nella, I can't say that I like this man. Possibly a good man, but starchy, priggy, dogmatic, unimpressionable, and proud."

"Oh, what a character," cried Nella in dismay; "and yet how kind he was to me, for all his cold ways. I can remember every word he said. The little Bible that he gave me when I left Wilton for good is up-stairs now upon my table. I had it

in my pocket that night at the Joiner's Arms, when you came to save me, uncle."

"If I lived a hundred years, I should never like him much," muttered Mr. Hewitt. "There's a knock for you! it makes you wonder when he is going to leave off, and why he should make more noise than anybody else. A clergyman should be less pretentious in his style of knocking at doors—some one might have been ill or asleep. Asleep—ah, that's not a bad idea. The only time I ever called upon him, and when my heart was full of a great suspense, Nella, he found it convenient to keep his eyes shut. So do I for the present; therefore get on as well as you can without me."

George Hewitt was a man not without his idea of a jest, though his jesting was of a grim kind, and only apparent in his best moods. He was a man, too, who seemed to remember everything, and it was strange that on that Sunday night, when he was excited and unlike himself, he should have borne in remembrance the slight which the Reverend Theobald Gifford had offered him at Wilton.

When the Reverend Theobald Gifford was announced and shown into the parlour, he found a tall, dark-haired maiden, half bowing, half curtsying towards him, and a thick-set man, with a silk hand-

kerchief over his head, apparently asleep in an arm-chair.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with a sharp glance towards Mr. Hewitt, "I was not aware that your father was asleep, or I should not have intruded thus unceremoniously upon you. Your father, I imagine?"

"Mr. Hewitt is my uncle, sir."

"And your name is——"

"Hewitt also."

Nella coloured at this reply. She was doomed to be evasive in the presence of Mr. Gifford. This was beginning again the old duplicity, and yet she had learned to be truthful, and had grown almost naturally towards the light, when the right light was shining on her, and those about her were gentle as well as pious folk.

Nella bade Mr. Gifford be seated, and then looked shily towards him, fearful that she might be recognised by those keen, penetrating eyes which had dazed her before that time, and had sought to read her very soul. But she did not remember how much she had altered as she glanced at him who had altered not at all since their last meeting. She could imagine that she was still the little girl at whom he had preached, and whose efforts to break away from her dark life he had doubted—not without reason, as it had appeared.

Yes, the Réverend Theobald Gifford had not altered one jot since we met him last. When first sketching him to our readers, we said that he was a man who looked older than his years, and now he had simply let his years catch up to his looks. There were no fresh lines to his face, although there was a deeper, even a sadder expression in the countenance turned towards the farmer's niece, and the hair—prematurely grey, as the reader is aware—was as thick as ever. He was the same man of four years since, thought Nella, and his words were measured as carefully and slowly forth, and delivered in that clear, metallic, unsympathetic tone which had set her girl's heart against him—and yet which, strange to say, made it beat almost with gratitude now, for all the good that he had wished her once. If he could only know all—if she could only fall at his feet and tell him all, in that hour of their new meeting!

“You are aware, perhaps, Miss Hewitt, that I am the new rector of Deeneford, and that I arrived here on the same day as your uncle and yourself. I have been going the rounds of my parishioners this morning, anxious to become known to them, and to know them in my turn.”

Nella bowed her head at this. She was not sufficiently self-possessed to express any comment

upon Mr. Gifford's statement, and Mr. Gifford was not waiting for it. This was simply his preface, heralding in a few of those leading questions to which he always liked clear and simple answers.

"I shall have the pleasure of numbering you and your uncle amongst my flock, I hope?"

"I—I can't say," was the reply.

"Indeed. Surely you are followers of the Church of England?"

"I think my uncle said that we were Dissenters," she said slowly.

"You think, Miss Hewitt! Surely you know whether you are Dissenters or not?"

"Before we came here, we—that is, I——"

"Was Church of England; quite right," said Mr. Hewitt, suddenly snatching his handkerchief from his face, and sitting bolt upright in his chair. "When I placed you at a finishing school, Eleanor, I entirely forgot to inquire what denomination the schoolmistress was; when you were finished, I found out that they had brought you up clean against my own convictions; for there is not a stancher Dissenter in all England than George Hewitt is. Good-afternoon, sir. The clergyman of the place, I imagine. I hope you are well."

"Thank you, I am pretty well, Mr. Hewitt."

Mr. Gifford looked as attentively at the farmer

as the farmer looked at him, but there was no sign of recognition on the features of the younger man. The grey whiskers were missing from the uncle's face, Nella noticed for the first time; but that dogged, hard expression of Mr. Hewitt's was new to her, and she thought that she had never seen her uncle look so stubborn or so ignorant. The eyes were not half their size, and were puckered at the corners in an odd way, which gave him an ugly and conceited air that she did not like at all. She would have scarcely known her uncle, she thought, had she met him out of doors.

"I dare say now," said Mr. Hewitt, speaking with extraordinary rapidity and bluntness; "that you are sorry that I'm not of the Established Church, a fellow to set an example to all the clodhoppers in his employ by running after you at every opportunity, and never missing a hot Sunday after all the hard work of the week. But I like Dissent best; it's less stuck up, Mr.——?"

"Gifford," concluded the new rector, not yet recovered from his amazement at the reception he had met with.

"Therefore, being a Dissenter, you'll no more care for my company than I shall care for yours, and we shall be very good friends apart, each attending to his own business. When you are hard-

up for money for your schools or for the poor of the place, or anything of that kind, you may drop me a line and I shan't be found backward with my subscriptions, for all the religious convictions that I may have."

Mr. Gifford slightly inclined his head at this, by way of delicate intimation, perhaps, that he might trouble Mr. Hewitt one of these fine days, and then he said with a half-sigh—

"I am sorry to learn you are a Dissenter."

"You don't like Dissenters?"

"I do not say that," was the quick answer, "but of course I have no faith in the teachings of Dissent, and I should not like to see Dissent spread in my parish. You will be one of the principal farmers here, exercising in your way a certain amount of influence over your servants, and setting to many who will look up to you an example that I cannot think a good one. Was Mrs. Martin's agent aware that you were a Dissenter when you took this place?"

"He did not ask—I did not tell him."

"It is a pity," said Mr. Gifford thoughtfully, "I wonder what——?"

"There, there, Mr. Gifford, it is not fair to lead me into argument, and as any religious argument is an abomination of mine, I'll take care that you

never do. I say my prayers at times, love my neighbours a little, and mind my own business, when they'll let me. That's a good religion, you must own."

"May I ask what particular form of Dissent you have adopted?"

"Well, it's a religion of my own," said Mr. Hewitt, with a short laugh, to which Mr. Gifford did not respond; "and I don't like interference with it."

"You are what the world calls a free-thinker, perhaps?"

"The world never lets a man think freely—it interferes with him, and puts its narrow, worldly construction upon all his actions. But I shall not argue, Mr. Gifford; and, to cut matters short, I am not coming to Deeneford church."

"I am very sorry that you have arrived here with those strange, unsettled ideas which I perceive you have, and which I hope it will not be impossible to alter."

"You hope in vain, sir. I never change my mind."

"Have you never changed it in your life? Given up something that was bad, and which at one time you thought was good—a bad thought or habit?"

Mr. Hewitt looked down at this, ran his hands

through his hair, coughed, and wound up by giving an impatient stamp of his foot upon the floor.

"We have all done that, I dare say," he answered. "Given up good ideas, too, thinking they were bad ones, for we don't all grow better as we grow older, I suppose."

"I shall be glad of an hour's quiet conversation with you, when you have the time to spare," said Mr. Gifford quietly.

"I never have time to spare. I am naturally a busy man."

"Ah, we shall find the opportunity," said Mr. Gifford, undismayed by the demonstrative opposition which confronted him. "I shall wait for it anxiously, and not despair yet of seeing you at Saint Philip's."

"It's of no use your wasting time upon me. I am a firm man."

"Well, so am I."

The rector rose with a smile upon his pale face, and extended his hand to Mr. Hewitt, who took it after a moment's hesitation. The two firm men looked into each other's eyes unflinchingly before they separated, and the elder man watched the other out of the house, and along the garden path, after a good-afternoon had been bestowed upon the farmer's niece.

He was watching still, although Mr. Gifford had

long since passed out of his range of vision, when Nella came softly to his side.

"I am sorry, uncle."

"Sorry for what?" he asked quickly.

"Sorry that you have been hard with him—unlike yourself."

"At my worst, Nella?"

"Well, yes, at your worst."

"Not quite at my worst," he added with a shudder. "What I am at my worst, child, is known only to myself. But I did not want the man to come again—to think that he could make a convert of me to all his childish reasoning. I am a religious man in my way now. I believe in a miracle. I am thankful that my latter days have been made so much brighter than they deserved to be. But I don't want to be preached at, and especially by that man. They must not find out our secret, these people hereabouts, whom we don't care to know, and don't want to know."

"I would not have them know us for the world, uncle," said Nella, "for you have made me afraid. Can they take me back to the Reformatory, or to prison?"

"Yes. You broke the laws four years ago, and the law is never merciful. This for your sake, Nella, and yet you wonder why I was not friendly with that parson who has known us both."

"He will come again ; he is a persevering man."

"Yes, confound him, so he is. Well, I am never at home. Thank our stars that we are on the hill-side, and that when I see him coming I can start into my meadow, and get away from him at any moment."

"What a good man to take all this trouble, in the face of the opposition which he knows he must encounter !"

"It is his business," said Mr. Hewitt carelessly.

"Don't you think that he is a good man ?"

"I dare say he is in his way. But then I don't like his way."

"And his sister, how good she was—how I should like to see her again, to be sure !"

"Nella, these are foolish thoughts to have ; they make you restless. Better to go away again, than stay surrounded by these people. It seems something more than chance that has led us to this spot. What is to come of it, I wonder ?"

Then a second fit of thought attacked George Hewitt, and when Nella spoke to him again, he bade her leave him to himself, for he had much to think about, and did not care to be disturbed.

CHAPTER THE THIRD.

DEENEFORD HALL.

THEOBALD GIFFORD did not return to the village after his afternoon call upon the new tenant of the Upland Farm. When he had closed the white gate in the garden fence behind him, he went further up the hill in the direction of Deeneford Hall.

"I am behind time a little," he said, looking at his watch, "but they will not mind that. They have got on very well together without me, I dare say," he added, and here even a little sigh escaped him.

Everybody got on very well without him, he had begun to suspect, and that was perhaps one of Mr. Gifford's troubles of which he never spoke, which he always carefully disguised. He was an ambitious man, and anxious to be loved in every direction, like one conscious of his own worth. But then he was a punctilious, undemonstrative man, and there were times when it was difficult to make out what he

wanted or what he was thinking about; indeed, a man of a few eccentricities and doubts, and, for a clergyman, unimpressionable and ungenial, but still doing his duty according to his own ideas, and not doing it badly, take him altogether. He believed that there was no one in the world who thoroughly understood him, not even his second wife, whom he had married wholly for love; but then he was a man who took no great pains to make himself comprehensible. He thought that everybody should see through him like a glass, and yet there was not a man living whose ideas at times were more difficult to guess at or whose private character was harder to define. Possibly as our story proceeds we shall know him better ourselves, for we have not yet set in his fit and proper place the Reverend Theobald Gifford. The light falls anglewise upon him, and makes cross-shadowings.

They who had got on very well without him were his wife, a Miss Masdale—whom he had known at Wilton and had met again at Ilfracombe in search of health there, when he was rector of a village in Devon, a young lady whose piety and gentleness had touched his heart at last, and led to his proposal for her hand; the same young lady who, our readers may recollect, fainted away when Mr. Gifford preached his farewell sermon at Wilton church—

his sister Augusta, Mr. Horace Essenden, of whom we have caught a passing glimpse, and Mrs. Martin, the lady of Deeneford Hall itself.

He was almost certain that they had got on very well without him, when the servant had admitted him into the great house, and informed him that they were in the garden playing croquet on the lawn ; quite certain when he paused at the drawing-room window which opened on the garden, and looked thence at the group upon the lawn, keeping back himself in the shadow of the room for a longer time than was necessary.

A watcher of Mr. Gifford in his turn might have wondered why he paused so long there ; what had brought him to a full stop, after he had dismissed the servant, and rooted him as it were to the costly carpet, whereon he stood motionless. There was nothing out of the common way in the sunshine beyond ; the game of croquet was over, the balls and maces were strewn carelessly about the grass ; Mrs. Martin, a tall, slim old lady, was bending over some flowers with his sister Augusta, and evidently expatiating on their colour, bloom, and rarity ; Mr. Essenden, the betrothed of his sister, and the friend of the family, was thoughtfully sauntering along with his hands behind him ; and on a little rustic seat, some ten or twenty yards from the rest, sat

Mrs. Gifford quite alone, and with a face almost as thoughtful as her husband's.

Mrs. Gifford was a pretty woman of the middle height, slight of figure, but graceful of form, neither dark nor fair, verging on the former, if brown hair and soft brown eyes stand for anything, despite the purity of complexion, and the fair skin of the blonde. Mrs. Gifford was a lady of two-and-twenty, although she looked two or three years less than that age, so girlish was her figure and face. One would scarcely have set her down for a wife, far less a minister's wife, when meeting her for the first time. She was maiden-like in appearance and in costume; she always dressed in good taste, but she was fond of muslin and gay silk sashes round her waist, just as she had been fifteen months ago before her marriage—which had not altered her taste in any way, although let it be said here that Mr. Gifford had not objected to her style, and had, indeed, always thought his wife the most elegantly dressed woman in England.

Theobald Gifford was an uxurious man in his heart, and had paused to admire his wife for awhile, sitting there aloof from the rest of the company, and thinking of him perhaps engaged already in the task of visiting and consoling—a task in which, to do her justice, she had helped him a little in Devon-

shire, and would help him here in good time. Altogether a happy, pretty, accomplished wife of his he considered—not without faults, of which a good opinion of herself was one, although everybody had a good opinion of her too, and why should she be different to the rest of the world? Surely that would have been affectation, and possibly the Reverend Theobald Gifford had thought so, for he believed that his Laura was almost a faultless woman, and was therefore, our lady readers will see, one of the best of husbands.

When Mr. Gifford had quite done admiring his wife in the shade of the drawing-room curtains, he stepped into the garden, and was at her side before his friends beyond were aware of his arrival.

“Well, Laura,” he said, laying his hand upon her shoulder, “what is troubling your mind to-day to set you in this pensive attitude?”

Laura started as his hand touched her, and then looked up laughingly in his face.

“Wore I so very woeful a countenance, Theo?” she asked. “I suppose it is the croquet which has hipped me to death.”

“I thought that it was a favourite game of yours, dear.”

“It was once, but when one has given up flirtation, and when there is no one to flirt with,” she

added saucily, "and Augusta monopolises the one gentleman of the party, it is a little slow. Fancy Mrs. Martin for a partner, and, oh, dear, she is getting so prosy, Theo."

"Hush, my dear, she might hear you," said Mr. Gifford, looking very much scandalised at this outspoken remark, "and we should spare the feelings of our friends on all occasions."

"You are angry with me—the lecturing season is setting in," she said.

"Do I lecture you too much then, Laura?" he asked almost anxiously. "Tell me when I do, for that is a fault of mine, against which dear Gus protested more than once when she was my sole housekeeper."

"You are a little fidgety at times. I suppose that is natural to a life spent in lecturing and sermonising, Theo?"

"I suppose it is," he answered; "and then I am older than you—seven-and-thirty, Laura, almost—and you are younger and light-hearted, and take from my life much of the gloom that seemed once natural to it. But you understand me, dear; and at all events, your modern ways and my old-fashioned ones don't clash a great deal at present."

"Why, no, Theo—that is not likely."

"If Gus and Horace make as happy and con-

tented a pair, and I think that they will, I shall not have one care in the world. Ah, they have seen me at last."

He advanced towards them, as they turned and noticed the addition to their party, and Mr. Gifford shook hands with them, with Mr. Horace Essenden last, long and heartily, as befitted a greeting between men who esteemed each other, and who were likely to call each other brother very soon.

This Mr. Horace Essenden, we may mention here, had been engaged to Miss Gifford about twelve-months—not a longer period, although he had known the lady at Wilton, and was the very gentleman whom Mr. Gifford had mentioned to his sister as particular in his attentions even then. Miss Gifford had blushed at that time and denied the fact, the reader may remember, but Theobald had proved himself a keen observer, and had seen which way affairs were drifting in his quiet way. To tell the truth, he had been a little annoyed in the old Wilton days by the hanging back of Mr. Essenden, who had been always considered a shy man, as well as a clever one. He had dangled after Augusta, Theobald had thought, for too long a period, keeping more eligible offers away; for he had never been a rich man, or even supposed to have good prospects ahead of him until young

Ralph Martin, his first cousin, had died. Mr. Gifford was unworldly enough not to study prospects too much, and he had always his suspicions that Gus liked this handsome, clever fellow, who, however, kept most of his cleverness for the volumes of poetry which he composed at times, and which, though they did not take the world by storm, yet gained him his fair share of praise—put, on one special occasion, and greatly to his surprise, fifty pounds in his pocket—and gave him only a few “cuts up” in journals that would not acknowledge him to be anything but a rhymester.

Mr. Gifford respected talent of any sort, and when he found that Augusta—his quiet, matter-of-fact sister—had in her heart begun to think too much of Mr. Essenden, and had more than once shown a little jealousy in society at other ladies monopolising the attention of the gentleman, he had hoped that something would come of it for poor Gus's sake. But he was a reserved man, and said very little, though he watched a great deal. At times he had been hopeful; then again he had been inclined to set down Mr. Essenden, for all his bashfulness, for one of those cold-blooded, thoughtless, if not unprincipled dangles, who creep about society professing a great reverence for the fair sex, hovering on the brink of attentions which are

particular, and yet not particular enough, and who always vanish away at the last moment, when hearts have been touched, or hopes have been raised. When Mr. Essenden let them go away to Devonshire without saying a word of the state of his affections, and when his sister Gus was a trifle thoughtful for some weeks in their new home, his opinion of the man, whom he had liked, fell several degrees, and he shrugged his shoulders, and wrote the fascinating Horace down as a fellow who might have known better than to have been quite so attentive—almost a bad fellow, in fact.

But when, after some years' separation, he reappeared in Devonshire, and became once more attentive, and once more seemed to win, after awhile, upon the affections of his sister, the Reverend Theobald Gifford took matters into his own hand, and one day astonished the poet with a few home-thrusts. These home-thrusts settled the case. Mr. Gifford spoke to him quietly one day in the library, when Horace was turning over the books there, and Horace blushed and stammered like the shy fellow that he was, and confessed at last that he had loved Augusta all his life—that he was waiting patiently but earnestly for some sign that his affection was returned, to pour his heart's passion at her feet. He spoke eloquently

and warmly, and Theo wrung his hand, and told him that he had done him an injustice in his thoughts, and hoped that he would be successful in his courtship of Augusta—as he thought, between themselves, he would be.

After that followed Mr. Essenden's offer to Augusta herself, and Augusta communicated the tidings to her brother, solicited his advice, and even resolved to take it if it exactly consorted with her own; and Mr. Gifford listened with a grave countenance, congratulated her on winning this young man to herself, and said nothing concerning his own part in the domestic drama, like the hypocrite that he was for the first time in his life.

After that, Horace Essenden and he were friends, as might have been expected—men who exchanged deep thoughts, and had long friendly arguments about everything that came uppermost in science, philosophy, belles-lettres, and at times religion—men who evidently respected one another's talents in their respective fields of labour. Then came Mrs. Martin on the scene in search of an heir, now that her own son had been snatched away from her, and Theobald Gifford, albeit not a worldly man, or a man of worldly calculations, was glad to see that Horace was in high favour with the aristocratic gentlewoman, and that Augusta was not

objected to for her nephew's future wife. All, in fact, good friends, and all things flowing onwards to what seemed a fair termination to the story—not a cloud in the blue heaven to mar any one's rejoicing.

Thus to the day in summer when Mrs. Martin had recommended Mr. Gifford to purchase the Deeneford living, and everybody settling down in Huntingdonshire.

The wedding had been fixed for some time in the spring; Mrs. Martin had insisted upon a day being named by Augusta before the month was out, and there had been a little jesting in the garden about it, before Mr. Gifford had arrived. There was no more croquet that afternoon—Mr. Gifford was not great at croquet, but left that exciting game for the leisure hours of his curates, who were generally younger and more agile men, with no household cares on their minds; and after a little gossiping in the garden, dinner was announced at the early hour of five. It was not a full-dress dinner, but a quiet meeting of people interested in each other, and who were likely to be allied to each other presently. The ladies were not in low bodies and short sleeves, and Mr. Gifford wore his white cravat as a sign of his order, and not by any means significant of his intention to dine out at his friend's expense. A pleasant little dinner party of well-bred folk—

wanting one more gentleman on the left of Mrs. Gifford, perhaps, to relieve Mr. Essenden of his double attention, for Mrs. Martin had secured the rector to herself by the time dessert was on the table, and was full of confidence as to her future arrangements for the young couple, and perhaps a trifle prosy, as even good old women will become, heaven bless them, when inclined to dilate on their favourites.

It had been evident to all for some time that Mrs. Martin's heart was very much fixed on this marriage. She was a woman of keen perceptions, and had seen very quickly that Augusta Gifford was the girl whom she would have chosen herself for her nephew's wife. It was more evident than ever on that night to Mr. Gifford, that even in a worldly sense this was likely to be a most excellent match for his sister. A marriage of love, and with plenty of money to flow into the common purse as well, what greater good fortune could Mr. Gifford be thankful for? He paid every respect to Mrs. Martin's remarks that evening, notwithstanding those vain repetitions which rendered her conversation monotonous, and which he excused in a woman whose heart was full; and when, after dinner, in the drawing-room, she led him away from the younger folk to a sofa all to themselves, and launched forth

again on the old well-worn theme, he maintained his grave, respectful demeanour, and it was impossible to guess from his countenance that he was wondering when she would come to a conclusion.

He discovered at last that she left off when it was time to go home, and though he had not spent an intellectual evening, despite Mrs. Martin being an accomplished woman, he did not regret the time spent there. The two young ladies and Mr. Essenden had enjoyed themselves, and Mr. Essenden had acquitted himself with honours of the duties devolving upon his double charge, and had not shown more attention to one than another; as might have been expected.

The little party was over at last—a carriage had come for Mr. Gifford, his wife, and sister; adieux had been exchanged; the carriage had rolled away towards the rectory; and aunt and nephew were alone together in the drawing-room.

“Well, Horace,” said the aunt as her nephew sat moodily at the table turning over the leaves of a Tennyson, “come and sit by my side, and confess to me what a happy evening you have spent.”

Horace sat beside her as requested, and the fond old lady let her hand drop upon his own affectionately.

“I am sorry that I did not manage a little more

cleverly, dear, but Mr. Severn, my agent, disappointed me at the last moment."

"I am glad of that—I don't like agents, and I object to Mr. Severn especially. The fellow has not a single idea beyond his business."

"An honourable and good man, who has benefited us by keeping to his one idea, at which it is not for you or me to scoff, Horace," she said.

"Right. I don't scoff at him; but I didn't want to see him; I don't know that I cared to see anybody to-day," he said.

"My dear Horace, is anything the matter?" and the grey eyes regarded the handsome face with motherly interest.

"I am not quite well—my head aches confoundedly."

"You have been working too hard. Yesterday you were in your study all day."

"Yes, perhaps it's that."

"I hope that there is nothing else on your mind save the new poem to depress it?" said Mrs. Martin, curiously.

"What makes you think there is?"

"I don't say that there is—I express a hope that there is not; if there should be anything, you would not keep it from the old aunt, Horace, for she has no secrets from you."

He was touched by this appeal; moreover, his was a nature inclined to speak out, or he would not have responded so readily to her. He turned to her eagerly, and faced those calm, inquiring eyes unflinchingly.

"Well, aunt," he said, "I cannot bear this any longer. I have something to tell you, which will surprise you very much."

CHAPTER THE FOURTH.

A FRANK CONFESSION.

AUNT and nephew regarded each other attentively after the words which had escaped the latter, and which we have recorded in our preceding chapter. Neither seemed inclined to break the spell of the long silence that followed Horace Essenden's startling announcement; each was considering very deeply what was to be the result of this.

"Well?" Mrs. Martin said at last.

Horace saw that it was possible that his aunt had guessed his secret, or part of his secret, and was prepared for his confession. She had even drawn herself a little away from him; let her hand drop from his listlessly, as though he had already fallen away in her regard for him. And yet her kind words had touched his heart, and led him to speak out at first.

"Aunt," he burst forth, "I am a miserable wretch—a coward and a hypocrite!"

"Oh, no; not so bad as that, at the very worst, Horace."

"A coward in not being able to face the truth—in shrinking from it at every opportunity," he cried, "and a hypocrite in leading them all to think that I am content with everything around me!"

"What has made you discontented, Horace?"

"My own heart, which is full of wickedness—which I try to subdue and teach its duty, but which fails me when it should be most strong."

He was extravagant in his words and in his actions; but then he was much excited, his face was flushed, his hands trembled on his knees, and his lower lip quivered like a woman's. Certainly a very sensitive as well as a very handsome man was Horace Essenden; perhaps the study of poetry had had something to do with the relaxation of his nerves.

"Well, Horace, how can I help you in your trouble?" said Mrs. Martin calmly.

She was a woman who had recovered herself, and now sat quiet and observant, waiting for the poet's revelation. She was not inclined to allow herself to be too much excited by her nephew's confession, for she understood his character, appreciated its virtues, and knew where the weak points of it lay. He was extravagant and eccentric at times, but he was a man of high principle, she believed—not like his brother Paul, of whom we shall speak anon—and he had been all his life open to reason, and one to be

influenced by kindness and trust. A good-natured, weak man—nothing more; and as all handsome men are weak, why should she distress herself concerning this ebullition of feeling on the part of her Horace?

“You can help me, aunt, by giving me your advice,” he said, in answer to her last question, “for I am about to tell you what I would not breathe to another living soul.”

“So serious as that, then?”

“Aunt,” he said, looking down on the ground, “I do not love Augusta Gifford. I esteem her highly—I have tried with all my heart and soul to love her, but I can’t.”

“Yet you asked the girl to be your wife?”

“In a rash moment—yes.”

“You had followed her for years, paying her those attentions which were most unfair to pay, considering your feelings towards her. Why was this?” asked Mrs. Martin gravely, but with no particular excitement manifested.

“I thought that she would make me a good wife—I felt at times that I should be able to love her as she deserved; but I had intended to do nothing rashly, and I waited to know the exact state of my own heart before I pledged myself in all good faith to her.”

"Where is your excuse for this change of mind?"

"Her brother was precipitate one day. He told me frankly that he was anxious concerning my attentions to his sister, and he asked me as a friend for my confidence. What could I say then, taxed thus by him, but that I loved Augusta?"

"And that was not the truth?"

"No, it was not. I fancied that it might be—in my excitement I deceived myself, and the result was this engagement. Now I see my folly. What trouble is in store for Augusta and me—how impossible is it that we should ever know happiness together."

"Yes, Horace, you are very weak—weaker than I ever imagined you were."

The old lady sighed over the want of moral courage in her nephew, and Horace laid his hand upon hers as she had done a few moments since. He was surprised at the sudden closing of the fingers upon his, and the firm hold that she took of him.

"Horace," she said coldly but decisively, "that man is a coward and hypocrite indeed who would deliberately deceive a woman as you have done. The Essendens are above it, and this is a spasm of false sentiment, not your natural feelings. I don't believe all this, I can't believe it: she is too good

for you, and you should be proud of your prize, not full of silly maanderings concerning it."

"Yes, she is too good for me," was his answer. "It is her goodness, her deep feeling, her religion which is all unsuitable for me."

"She will make you a better man, and you may be thankful for it."

"She is a woman who would not seek to bind me to a promise which I feel it is not in my power to fulfil."

"It must be kept, that promise, Horace," said Mrs. Martin with increasing firmness, "or I never care to see your face again. Your word has been pledged, and it shall not be broken with my consent, whatever may be the ultimate result."

"You—can you, a woman, aunt, persuade me to continue thus to deceive her?" he said in his amazement. "Is it possible that you wish me still to marry her?"

"Yes, quite possible," was the reply, "for I have set my heart on it, and at all events Augusta Gifford loves you. This is only a silly sentiment, which will die out in every-day life, and leave you a happy man with her; and if it were to increase and render you miserable for ever, I should still say, 'Be faithful to your word, as your poor father was, and lose everything except that honour which he

bequeathed to you to keep for him.' There, Horace, that is a long speech for an old woman."

"I thought," he said, in an hesitating manner, "that you would advise me to lay the true state of my feelings before her, and leave the decision in her hands."

"Knowing that she would release you at once, being a proud and high-spirited woman, like myself," she added, with a naive conceit; "but you have no right to break her heart in that fashion, by letting her see what a fool and liar you have been."

Horace Essenden winced at these plain words. This was putting the matter in a sensible light, and confounding him. He was surprised at his aunt's firmness, for she had been a woman who had always loved him, and given way to him, and he had hoped that after a few regrets, a few tears, she would have sided with him in his present dilemma, and helped to assist him from the difficulty in which his own impulsiveness had placed him. For he was truly miserable: his nature was frank enough to despise the part which he was playing, and he would have been glad to be free again, and his own master.

"I am sorry that I have told you this," he said gloomily.

"I am glad," she answered, "for, now I know what the complaint is, my woman's shrewdness may

effect your cure. If you were a strong-minded man, dogged and brave, I might have advised you differently to this ; but I know where your one chance of happiness lies, and I cannot give my consent to cast it from you in rash haste. Augusta Gifford is not a romantic girl, will not require from you too much semblance of devotion ; she will have every faith in your love, and give back her whole heart's wealth. What better or brighter future can even your poetic dreamings show you than that ?”

“Nothing.”

“Then, Horace, beg my pardon for this silly confession. The course of true love has run too smoothly for your idealism, and there have been no rivals, no jealousy, no chance of losing her from the first day of your engagement to her. Hence there has been a little monotony in this happy courtship, and you are fond of life, excitement, something out of the common way. Ah, Horace, I sighed for peace at your age, not for the storm upon the higher ground.”

“It is not peace that makes my heart ache,” he said.

“It is not, I hope, love for another woman,” said Mrs. Martin quickly ; “if so, then give Augusta up, own yourself false, and ask for the pardon of her of whose love you are tired. Tell her the whole story of your baseness, and how

you were led away, or have led another away, caring not for any principle of right in your cupidity. There, tell me that is the secret, and leave me in my loneliness for ever."

"No, that is not the secret," he said slowly; "you should think better of me than that, aunt."

"My dear Horace, I do," replied Mrs. Martin, "but your strange manner leads me to say strange things. There is, I suppose, a reason," she added, "for desiring to break off your engagement with Miss Gifford?"

"The reason that I feel I shall not make her a good husband—that I do not love her, as so good and pure a woman deserves to be loved."

"Love will come in good time—love is sure to come, out of very gratitude," affirmed his aunt; "unless you give way too much, and seek temptation, instead of trying to resist it."

"You may trust me."

"I think I may," she added confidently, and more cheerfully. "So good a brother as mine was not likely to have *two* bad sons. I am too keen an observer not to know how worthy you are to succeed my own dear boy who died so early. There, Horace, we will keep our honour bright, for yours is mine, and what tarnishes yours degrades me; and with Heaven's good help we will not, under any circum-

stance of life, swerve from the words we have spoken or the faith we have pledged."

Yes, a high-spirited gentlewoman this—one who knew her own virtues, and was proud of them—proud of those ancestors who had bequeathed them to her, and for whose sake, as well as her own, she ranked them highly. Proud of her nephew, too, whose talents were whispered about, if not trumpeted forth in the great world, and whose little weaknesses were not of the heart, for the hearts of the Essendens had been always sound to the core—why, even poor Paul, of whom nobody spoke now, had been only his own enemy. Horace was full of wild thoughts—subject to fits of depression, the result of over-study; but happily, thought the aunt, there was no harm in him, and he was an honourable, frank, warm-hearted fellow, who acted always for the best. She knew his ways pretty well, and she felt that, the confession made, the outburst of confidence poured forth, and the weak man reasoned with, he would become reconciled to his position, and see his future in a clearer light. She had been astonished that evening, for he had spoken more earnestly than his wont, and had confessed to a feeling which she had not imagined he possessed; but his was a nature that would right itself, and, after all, there was not much doubt that he loved Augusta Gifford as well as he could ever

love woman. That he was a vain man in some respects, a weak one, and easily influenced, were all so many arguments in favour of her wish to marry him to a deep-thinking, practical girl. Miss Gifford was exactly fitted for him, she saw at a glance, when he had first introduced her as his future wife; and had there been no engagement between Augusta and her nephew, she would have schemed to promote it. But the engagement being settled, she had had nothing to think about save the future happiness of this young couple, until Horace had dashed her down that night with his impetuous confession.

It was not all over even yet, for when he had risen to bid her good-night, and had stooped down to kiss her forehead, he said, with her hands in his—

“Blame me not too much for my weakness, for I have striven to do my best all my life, and I do not know that I have a great deal wherewith to reproach myself. I will do my best to the end.”

“Keeping always to your word, Horace,” she added.

“Yes, always. It is right, perhaps, that others should not suffer as well as myself for the rash haste of which I am the victim.”

“I do not believe in men falling victims to anything. It is you men who win the victory, it is we women who suffer.”

"Not always," he answered, with a melancholy shake of the head.

"Is there anything more to tell me, Horace?" asked his aunt. "If it is not love for any woman now—and that would be shameful and wrong—was there once a woman whom you loved better than Augusta Gifford?"

"Well, yes, there was."

"A boy's love—a romantic passion, which to look back upon more closely resembles truth than this. Ah, that is like a poet, not a man."

"Like a madman, which I am at times, try as I will to sober down, and let the world see how good I am."

"What became of her? Is it a long love story, because we will sit down again?"

"She married another man; that's all," was the short reply.

"After confessing that she loved you?"

"Yes."

"And it is the remembrance of such a woman that renders you discontented now," exclaimed Mrs. Martin—"a woman whom you should despise for her unworthiness; whom you should hate, as every honest man and woman would hate you if you were as false as she was."

"Right, right," he replied. "I will say no more

about it. I should have been firmer, and not have mentioned this; but my heart was full, I had no one in whom I could trust, and you reminded me to-night of that mother to whom I took all my troubles once."

"Trust in me always as in the mother, Horace," she said, pressing his hands before he took his departure to his own room, with the tears brimming in his eyes.

He was certainly a weak man, for when the door was locked upon his sorrows, this great fellow of five feet eleven flung himself dressed upon his bed, and cried a little over the embarrassments of his position, and at the troubles by which he was encompassed. Cried because he did not want to be married. Poor man!

CHAPTER THE FIFTH.

MISS GIFFORD PROVES HERSELF TO BE SHARPER
THAN HER BROTHER.

MEANWHILE the young woman who was the cause of all this fuss went on her way through life rejoicing. She had no more idea that Horace Essenden was sorrowing about his engagement to her, than she had that she was sorrowing herself. She was a light-hearted young woman, confident in her future, secure of her lover, and proud of that big, good-looking, curly-headed man, who wrote poetry for a public that condescended to be amused thereby, and to consider the writer passing clever in his way. She knew herself that Horace was not a strong-minded man, but then he was affectionate, warm-hearted, good-tempered, and a thorough gentleman, and perhaps she was strong-minded enough for the two of them, for all that pretty soft face which rippled frequently with smiles now.

Looking at her in her three-and-twentieth year—she would be three-and-twenty next October—we

may wonder with Mrs. Martin, of Deeneford Hall, what possible reason there could be for Horace Essenden's objection to the match which he had sought out for himself. She was certainly pretty, and, what is more, her prettiness was not that of the doll with its waxen complexion, and its long stare a-head at nothing in particular, but that prettiness of expression and of earnest life which shone out of her clear grey eyes, and stirred one's heart to the depths to watch her face. A good woman, but not perfection, as we may perceive hereafter ; not obtrusively good ; keeping herself in the shade more than her brother, and yet winning more affection and confidence amongst those humble folk she sought with him than the Reverend Theobald Gifford was ever capable of doing. We have seen this in the early days at Wilton, before she had a lover on her mind ; we know that she was not so hard to move as her brother, and that she invariably evinced a greater sympathy and faith ; and it was the nature of Theobald, with all his goodness, to stand eternally upon guard, unless with those who were very near and dear to him, and them he would have trusted with his life.

The advantage of Miss Gifford over her brother might be attributed to the former being a better judge of human nature, although Mr. Gifford would never have acknowledged this. Indeed, he scarcely

knew that his sister made more way than he, and when this fact was brought unpleasantly home to him at times, he thought it was due to her sex, and the greater amount of deference which was naturally paid to it.

Therefore a good woman—only moderately good, not quite up to the standard of perfection which even our poor humanity can attain, and with the faults of our poor humanity about her to keep her to the level of her kind; a warm-hearted woman, but not a heroine; a well-read woman, but not a Blue-stockings; with a pretty, frank face, that had a cheerful way of looking at life, and bringing the sunshine with her wherever she went. What bee could be buzzing in the bonnet of Horace Essenden to render him dissatisfied with his good fortune?

He had followed her about for years, keeping, as the world says, eligible offers away; he had confessed his love at last, and been accepted as a favoured suitor. He was sure to be happy with her; and Mrs. Martin, a wise woman, had not done amiss for him—however much she may have been mistaken in what was best for Miss Gifford—in insisting that he should be held to the strict letter of his engagement, and keep his romantic nonsense for his poetry books.

If Augusta Gifford could have listened to that

interview between aunt and nephew at Deeneford Hall, the matter would very quickly have been settled, although she might not have worn so bright a look upon her face for awhile; but, with her, ignorance was bliss. Horace Essenden was a perfect being, who had loved her silently for years, and she was a happy woman in her own conceit.

She was happy enough, although her lover had gone to London for a few weeks, and she was left with her brother and her brother's wife for company. Business had taken Horace to London, he had told her—not the advice of his aunt, who had seen that a change would do him good, and lead him to return with all the more zest to his country home again. He was a man who liked London for awhile, but the pleasures and excitements of the great city palled upon him speedily, and Mrs. Martin was assured that he would return all the more contented for the change. So Miss Gifford was without her cavalier, and the days went on and he returned not, though he wrote letters occasionally, saying how glad he should be to get back to Deeneford. He had been away a fortnight, and the August and the harvest weather had set in fine and dry, when Augusta Gifford walked into the Upland Farm, and astonished the proprietor by her sudden appearance there. Mr. Hewitt during the last few weeks had dodged the

rector of Deeneford very cleverly, seeing him from the window advancing along the road, and beating a retreat at once, much to the dissatisfaction of Mr. Gifford, who considered himself very unlucky in the time of his visits, and expressed as much to Nella, who was certainly a strange, shy kind of young lady, he thought, for the daughter of an opulent farmer. But Mr. Hewitt had not bargained for the clergyman's sister, and though he had seen her coming up the road at about the same time at which he had been first favoured with a call from Mr. Gifford, he had imagined that she was proceeding to Deeneford Hall, and had taken but little heed of her until it was too late for an escape. He knew her at once, and there was a marked difference in his welcome to her from that of his welcome to her brother.

With her he was strangely respectful, almost deferential; rising and placing a chair for her with a hurried courtesy that was a trifle ungraceful, and remaining on his feet till she was seated, when he dropped into a chair, and hoped that she was well.

Miss Gifford looked steadily at him for a moment, as if she were trying to remember where she had met him last, and he reddened, put on his vacuous expression of countenance, and talked in a thick voice, that was not pleasant to hear.

There were a few commonplaces exchanged about the weather, the crops, and the meadow-land, and then Miss Gifford said quietly—

“My brother tells me that you are a Dissenter, Mr. Hewitt.”

“Yes, madam, that is the fact.”

“I am afraid your avowal was a great disappointment to him,” she said, “for he likes to be supported by the principal people in the place.”

“Leaving the worst of the village to the chapel; that’s Christian-like.”

“Still we are all on the same road, and there are many paths leading one way, where we shall meet at last. I do not exactly understand his disappointment, although I appreciate his efforts to bring you, if possible, to his own way of thinking.”

“Each man thinks he must be in the right.”

“And as Mr. Barber, of Zion Chapel, tries very hard to get a few of my brother’s flock to hear him, I suppose I may work in my brother’s cause for the church which he represents.”

“Yes, but I don’t like Mr. Barber,” said George Hewitt, with a flip of his hand to his ear; “he has been here once, calling me all kinds of miserable sinners, because I don’t take a pew in his stifling little chapel. I love fresh air too well, Miss Gifford—I fight for it; I cannot have too much of it.”

“But——”

“But,” he said, with sudden seriousness, “I pray in it, too; render thanks for all my good luck, my new happiness, and pray that I may keep straight, and be loved always by those I love and who love me. That’s true religion, I take it.”

“It is a true religious feeling,” said Miss Gifford thoughtfully. “I wish that you would not get out of the way when my brother calls.”

“He can’t do me any good.”

“You don’t like him?” was the next question.

“Oh, as for that, I don’t like any stranger. I have a fancy to keep aloof from society, for society has always done me harm—not good.”

“He would not do you any harm.”

“No, no; I don’t suppose he would—I’d take care that he shouldn’t, for the matter of that,” said Hewitt restlessly; “but my niece and I are anxious to keep quiet for the first twelvemonths at least. That is our reason, which I will ask you to respect.”

“May I see your niece?” said Miss Gifford. “Now that I am here, and as you give me no invitation to call again,” she added drily, “I should like to see Miss Hewitt.”

“May I ask your reason?” said the farmer suspiciously.

"I like to know every one by sight in Deeneford, and I presume that there is no reason on your side to hide her from me."

Mr Hewitt laughed loudly at this.

"Why, what reason can there be? Here, Eleanor, the lady from the parsonage, Miss Gifford, wants to say good-afternoon to you," he called up the stairs, after opening the door of his farm-house parlour for that purpose.

There was a faint response from a room above-stairs, and then the farmer and his guest waited patiently for Miss Hewitt's appearance, the farmer apparently at his ease, talking of his harvest, which was somewhat backward, but which he should begin next week, he thought, and of other matters, bucolic or parochial, with a volubility that somewhat surprised his listener.

When the door opened at last, and Nella came into the room, Mr. Hewitt looked at his visitor with an eager intentness, to see if any sign of recognition crossed her countenance. He was nervous and watchful—doubtful, despite all his past hopes, of the result of this meeting, and of his niece having changed so much after all as to be past all identification by this woman.

Nella came in, half curtsied, and then altered her mind and half bowed, in much the same manner

as she had acknowledged the presence of Mr. Gifford a few weeks since—that is, in a hesitative, awkward manner, which a woman was more likely to remark than a man. Miss Gifford bowed, looked again with greater earnestness at the farmer's niece, and then advanced a step or two towards her, saying—

“Why, it's Nella Carr!”

George Hewitt gave a groan, dashed his fist upon the table, muttered an oath of vexation at the result of all his scheming, and then stood baffled and annoyed, surveying the two women angrily. Nella was dismayed; she had recoiled as Miss Gifford had advanced, and then stopped suddenly, doubtful what to say or do.

“It is Nella Carr—it must be,” exclaimed Augusta. “I know that face too well not to recognise it, though it has become a woman's since I saw it last. You, sir, whom I thought I remembered”—turning to George Hewitt—“called at our house at Wilton one Sunday night, and expressed an intention of seeking out your niece, of rescuing her from the dangers which surrounded her. You have not forgotten that?”

“Oh, no, my memory is as retentive as your own,” he answered bitterly; “I forget nothing.”

“And you found her—saved her. I am very

.

glad," cried Augusta Gifford, "to meet you two together thus—to think that after all, Nella, you turned away from the darkness, and began the better life."

"May I—may I tell her everything?" asked Nella of her uncle.

"Yes, what you like. It cannot matter now to any one; we are found out and disgraced. We must go away from here."

"No, I hope not," said Miss Gifford warmly. "If it is necessary to keep your past life a secret—and it is never wise to tell the world all our antecedents—you may trust me as you trust yourselves."

"Your brother?"

"Need not know it. I would prefer, for reasons of my own, that he should not know it yet awhile."

"Well, well, I must have time to think. Thank you for offering to keep my secret, Miss Gifford; I may remind you of that promise for the sake of Nella here."

He went out of the house into the home-close; that was the field adjacent to his farm, where were some huge elms, under which he flung himself in the shadow, to reflect on all that might follow the revelation of his shabby mystery.

When the door was closed, Nella went timidly towards Miss Gifford and extended both her hands.

"Heaven bless you, madam; I am very, very glad

to see your face again—the face of the woman who first taught me right from wrong.”

“And I to see you, Nella, as I thought I never should again; for I have pictured you drifting further and further from right—becoming every day more hardened to all good impressions. What a change!”

“Yes, a great change.”

“When you turned from my advice, and did not keep your word with me, I thought——”

“Pardon me, but I am glad I am found out,” said Nella, with excitement, “if it is only to let you know that I was not so bad as you have been fancying for the last four years. I did intend to go to Grayling’s, but I was met at the station by people who knew me—awful people, whom I knew,” she added with a shudder, “and they drugged me and carried me off. When I came to myself I was too ill to move, and it was not till weeks had passed that I could crawl about. Then I knew it was too late—that there was no one living who would believe my story, and I was sinking back again, when my uncle came and rescued me. But, Miss Gifford, if I have become a better woman—not a lady, but yet an honest woman standing apart from all that disgraced my girlhood, it is to you I owe that change.”

"No, no. To your uncle, Nella."

"Had I never seen you, or been stirred by your picture of what I might become, and what I *was*; had I not been sure of your interest in me, your kindness to my mother who died on Wilton Heath, his coming would not have affected me. But you had sown the good seed in my heart, and I *was* hoping that it would be possible to become worthy of your trust, when I went away with him. It is your picture which I have always seen before me—the likeness of the gentle lady, who pitied the poor wanderer, and from her great heart's teachings showed her what was right."

She flung herself at Augusta Gifford's feet before she could be stopped, caught the gloved hands in hers, and kissed them passionately, like the wild, impulsive woman that she was in her intensity of gratitude.

"You are too generous in your thoughts of me," said Augusta, strangely moved; "you had only my best wishes for your better life—you have had the best efforts of your uncle. To give me the merit of saving you is to be ungrateful to him who has devoted his remaining years to your care."

"Oh, madam, I am not ungrateful," said Nella, rising, and dashing a few tears from her dark eyes. "I love him very much—I see all that he has

done for me, and I value every effort that he has made; but somehow, I have set your picture in the foremost place, as the first one who had ever trust in me."

"Is that quite true?"

"Yes; it was hearing of your confidence that gave rise to my uncle's, and suggested my escape. I had built on seeing you some day, and of telling you all this, little thinking that the recognition and the revelation would come so soon upon me."

"You did not go back to the reformatory, Nella?"

"It was his wish that I should not. I am still," she added, with a sigh, "an escaped convict."

"Yes, I see," said Miss Gifford; "it is a strange position, and we must keep your secret. I cannot advise you to return to Grayling's now that you have reformed, and I don't know in what way the law would regard this matter."

"Please don't speak of it," said Nella.

"The circumstances of the case would be taken into consideration, I dare say, as they are extenuating enough; but I am a woman, with a woman's reasoning, and in your place, I should not offer myself to the law's tender consideration," she added with a smile, to which Nella was not able to respond.

"What would Mr. Gifford think of this?"

"I really cannot say. He looks at things very

practically at times. A very just man—a very good one, but I do not know whether at all times I can set him down as merciful. We will keep our secret, Nella, and if it's very wrong to do so, why, we must be extra good to make up for it."

Whether this was her natural reasoning, or was promulgated in order to soften the sternness of Nella's thoughts, it is difficult to say; there was a certain amount of effect produced, and she continued her argument till Nella was convinced.

"I see the reason for keeping away from church," Augusta concluded. "I hope that, now the reason does not exist, you will come."

"I will come—that is, if he objects not."

"Is he likely to object? Why, he will come himself when he is convinced that he can trust me. And I hope that that will not take long," she added quietly.

"One moment."

Nella left the room fraught with a new impulse, and returned with a little Bible in her hand.

"Do you remember this?"

"What the one I saw—the one my brother Theo gave you," cried Augusta! "I am very glad that you have kept this in remembrance of us. And now, are we to be friends—may I call here now and then to talk to you?"

"It is not possible that we can ever be friends—quite friends," said Nella sadly. "I cannot under any circumstances be the friend of one who is as good and pure as you are. I have been a thief and a tramp, Miss Gifford, and there must be always that reminiscence between me and honest folk."

"We do not measure true repentance by so poor a standard."

"Pardon me, but it must be. I would be always your friend, watching you, and praying for you, but you must never be mine. I am not worthy of your friendship. Your servant—your slave with all my heart; but there we stop."

"Presently we shall see, Nella," answered Miss Gifford.

"In your prosperity you will be very happy, very much loved—as you must always be—and I will look at you from the distance, as at some one who is not exactly of my world—and ah! that's true enough."

"And in adversity—with trouble encompassing me—what then?"

"Oh, madam, then your friend till the good time comes round again—which good time will come, or there's no truth in this Book."

"Hush, Nella; yours is strange reasoning. You make a heroine of me, and I am a poor weak woman

like yourself. You are a hasty reasoner, and too full of gratitude—an odd girl altogether, that I don't quite understand yet. Some day I shall know you better."

"I hope you know me now, Miss Gifford; I am what I seem. I hide nothing from you."

"That is well; fear nothing, and conceal nothing."

"Except that I have run away from Grayling's."

"Ah, yes, we had better keep that secret. You took your reformation into your own hands instead of letting Grayling's do it for you. After all, the fault is not a great one. I wish that I was Secretary of State; I would soon settle this matter."

"And now, will you tell me about yourself, please? I am very, very curious."

They were seated facing each other then, and Nella crossed her hands together, and was full of interest.

"About myself? What about myself, Nella?"

"I should like to know if you are going to be married?"

This was the innocence of the girl that saw no embarrassment to follow—the ingenuousness of one who knew nothing of society, and asked a plain question in a straightforward manner.

"What made you think that I was going to be married, Nella?" said Augusta, blushing, and laughing at this speech.

“Plenty of young men would fall in love with you, and, I suppose, you would like one better than the rest, and pick him out.”

“As will be your case very shortly.”

Nella started—even frowned at this, and made a hasty movement with both her hands.

“Never, Miss Gifford—never,” she cried, in a stern voice. “I could not marry with that secret here, and I could not confess to any one my own dreadful past. But,” in an impatient tone, “you have not told me.”

“Is it necessary that I should, you inquisitive girl?”

“You would be proud of your choice, he would be proud of you. Why keep it back from any one?”

“Ah, why?” answered Augusta. “Well, I am going to be married next spring.”

“To a minister, or a lord?”

“Good gracious, no!” exclaimed Augusta, laughing. “One minister is enough in a family, Nella, and lords do not come in my way. I am going to marry Mr. Horace Essenden.”

Nella’s hands unclasped, and slid to her side, and a strange, bewildered look replaced the intense curiosity of a few moments since.

“Mr.—Horace—Essenden,” she repeated very slowly.

“Yes, that is the name.”

"The nephew of the lady who lives up at the hall—my uncle's landlady—you mean that gentleman?"

"Yes, I mean that gentleman. Do you know him?"

"I have seen him. He bade us welcome to our farm when we first came," said Nella. "He is a handsome man, with great brown whiskers?"

"Yes."

There was a pause; then Nella said, with a suddenness which startled Miss Gifford—

"And you love him very much?"

"With my whole heart, Nella, of course. Love him," said this outspoken girl, "better than my brother, or my own life."

"I have read of women being very much in love like this," said Nella musingly, "I didn't think it was quite true, until I heard you speak. I don't think it's right."

"Indeed—why?"

"In case of the man dying, or of the woman finding out that he did not love her so well as she had imagined, what then?"

"Oh, then the woman's heart breaks sometimes."

"Would yours?"

"I don't know,—probably not. What makes you ask such curious questions as these?"

"I am a curious girl."

"When Mr. Essenden comes back, I may tell him of the strange questions that a certain Miss Hewitt has put to me."

"Where is he, then?"

"He has been in London during the last two weeks."

"Indeed, has he?"

And then Nella Carr, alias Hewitt, became suddenly full of thought again.

CHAPTER THE SIXTH.

A PRODIGAL'S RETURN.

It was the first Saturday in August—a hot, dry, fine day, for which the farmers of Huntingdonshire had been looking anxiously, and harvest-time was close upon them. The wheat was hard and yellow in the husk, and cutting had already commenced in a county a trifle backward with its corn as a rule. The reapers were coming into Deeneford—wild, nomadic groups of men, women, and children—and were haggling for prices at the farm-house gates, and driving, on the whole, fair bargains. There were strangers' faces at the inn doors, and odd-looking characters in the village—men and women who followed the reapers, and were of a lower level still, and whose calling, unless it was gleaning, it was difficult to define. Careful folk, who had anything to lose, locked up more carefully in harvest-time, although the majority of strangers in the place consisted of honest, hard-working Irish people, with whom property was safe enough.

One man, neither a reaper nor an Irishman, came leisurely into Deeneford on the Saturday of the last summer month, and attracted a little notice from those who were astir that afternoon. A tall, somewhat high-shouldered man, with a heavy ragged brown moustache, and a face that was freckled very much, and had evidently caught its bronze tint from other skies than England's. The stranger was dusty, and had walked many miles that day—walked them at a fair pace too, if the methodical but long strides with which he came into Deeneford were any sample of his previous rate of progression. He walked with his hands in his pockets, and whistled as he walked melodies the most plaintive, as though there was breath to spare for harmony within him still.

He did not take much heed of passers-by, although it was apparent that men at work in the fields, and women at home peering over window-blinds, recognised him here and there; but when one old man with a barrow met him full front, and nearly run him down turning the corner of a lane, he cried out, "Ah, Master Grey; well and hearty, then!" clapped him on his poor old back, and marched away before the man could recover from his astonishment.

At the Deeneford Inn, before which the harvesters

were loitering—trade being slack as yet, and the great wages question not settled in all instances—he paused, and then turned into the broad passage towards the bar at the end thereof, when a buxom landlady in widow's weeds raised both her hands aloft in her surprise.

"It is Master Paul come back to Deeneford again then," she cried. "A hearty welcome to you."

"Thank you, Mrs. Coombes," he replied; "I like a hearty welcome back. I hope they'll all be as glad to see me as you are. I don't know why they shouldn't."

"With all your high spirits, and your games here, sir, I don't think you ever did anybody harm."

"Only myself, perhaps," he answered, laughing, "and the good I did to this place, and the long bills I ran up here—ah, and settled, too, before I went abroad."

"To be sure you did, and if there's anything—"

"No; not anything, thank you, Mrs. Coombes," he said, quickly. "I shall not commence the long bills again, and drinking I have given up for good, even at my aunt's expense. Well, what has become of them all?" he asked.

"All of whom, sir?"

"All and everybody about here. I thought it would save mistakes, and spare my ignorance, if I

dropped into this gossiping-shop first," he said. "People's feelings might be hurt by my rough remarks, and I might meet old friends, and ask after friends of theirs long since past inquiries."

"Ah, yes, sir. My poor dear husband is gone last Christmas, for one."

"Poor old Coombes! he was a rare fellow for long stories after his third glass of whiskey-and-water. I used to think of him in the Bush, and fancy that I could hear his cackling laugh over his own jokes sometimes. The old lady is well at the Hall, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir, very well."

"I hope she'll be as glad to see me as I shall be to see her," he said thoughtfully; "for though we never agreed, and I could never stand her lecturing, still I liked her. I know all about the changes up there," he said, nipping in the bud a long recital which he saw was hovering on the lips of the landlady: "the son and heir is dead, and my brother Horace reigns in his stead. Bravo, Horace! He deserves all the honours, and I'm not the man to try and cut him out, or the man likely to succeed, let me try never so hard. Mrs. Coombes, is there any of the old ale left, and can I take a glass here without all the village shrieking out that Paul Essenden drinks as much as ever?"

"You don't mind what the village says."

"I did not, but then I was a ne'er-do-weel," he said carelessly; "now, I am a respectable member of society."

Mrs. Coombes laughed; she did not believe that. She knew what Paul Essenden had been, and did not put faith in his amendment. He had been always a wild scapegrace, and everybody had been glad of his departure from the village six years ago, when he was two-and-twenty years of age; everybody glad but herself and her husband, who had thriven by his patronage.

"Laugh away, Mrs. Coombes," said he, as he drank off the ale which had been set before him. "I see my bad character sticks to me, and this is the retribution which descends on the heads of fellows like me. You don't think I am altered much?"

"Looking older, sir, of course, but I should have known you anywhere."

"I flattered myself that I was greatly altered."

"I hope you have made your fortune in the colonies, sir?"

"I made one, Mrs. Coombes, and lost it again. I wandered all over Australia trying to find another, which didn't turn up to reward my energy and industry."

"You've seen a deal of life, I'd be bound to say, now?"

"All kinds of life, and not all of it to my liking," he answered; "but it has done me good—no end of good. My aunt, and brother Horace, and old Pownie will be glad to hear that, though they'll take time to believe it's all true."

"Poor Mr. Pownie is dead too—been dead these three months, Mr. Paul."

"Has he, though? How they drop off whilst a man turns his back for awhile. He wasn't a bad fellow. I'm sorry he's gone, though how he did preach at me to be sure, as though I was the worst sinner and he the finest saint in Deeneford. So poor old Pownie's gone; and I have been thinking during my long walk to-day of what I should say to him. Who's his successor?"

"Mr. Gifford."

"Gifford, eh? Gifford of Wilton?"

"He had a church at Wilton once, I think."

"Ah, I don't want to know *him* again," said Paul Essenden, finishing his ale. "Preachers never were particularly to my taste, and at all events, I shall not be able to please that gentleman. Pownie would have been a different matter, for upon my word I did not treat him well. Take for my ale, please—which is not so good as it used to be, unless

my taste has deteriorated—and save me a bed to-night. I shall be back again, most likely,” he added, looking thoughtfully at the floor; “they’ll take time to understand me, and I haven’t come to ask favours of them, they must see that. Only to see them, and the old place, and then be off again.”

“Out of England, Master Paul?”

“Most likely. What’s Hecuba to me, or I to Hecuba? I wonder why I’m here at all, when only my brother Horace will be glad to see me, and wish me luck. How’s old Fordyce and his pretty daughter? Poor Polly, I suppose she’s married?”

“Yes, she married a grocer at Bulverton—young Haynes—after her father’s death.”

“What, Fordyce off too? What a scampering of the old stock to a better world! Why, there’s no one left to remember what a ‘mauvais sujet’ I was.”

“What a what, sir?”

“What a blackguard, I should have said. I beg your pardon, it’s exceedingly rude to speak Dutch when your listener is not acquainted with the language. Who has got the farm?”

“A Mr. Hewitt, sir, from your part of the world.”

“What part of the world do you mean by that? I have rolled over three-fourths of it.”

“It’s Mr. Hewitt from Australy, or Chiny, or some such outlandish place.”

"Ah, I only knew one farmer in Australia, and a good fellow he was, for all his bygones. He saved my life, lent me money—and the latter is the grand test of good fellowship. He—Hollo!"

And Mr. Paul Essenden paused suddenly to listen, and took his hands from his pockets, into which they had descended again from the mere force of a habit that he had acquired, and which, perhaps, had rendered him round-shouldered at an earlier period of his life. Some one was talking loudly under the porch of the inn, arguing a pound-shillings-and-pence question with men who spoke more loudly still, and with strong Irish accents.

"It's as much as the job's worth; I'm treating you fairly, but I will not be imposed upon."

"If yer honor 'll only say a shalling more an acre for it—and may we nivir see daylight if Mither Fordyce didn't give as much, and say he would be allers glad to see our faces agin at the same price—we'll close w' ye, and drink yer honor's health."

"No, what I say I mean. I don't go back from my word; I don't go forwards away from it."

"That's Mr. Hewitt, sir," said the landlady.

"Is it, though?" replied Paul Essenden. "Then my farmer's name was Hewitt too. I've a bad memory for names, I suppose, though I never remarked it before. Good-day for the present."

"Good-day, Mr. Essenden; we'll sit up for you to-night, then."

"Thank you, do," was the reply; "I shall return. I shall be more independent in this crib," he muttered; "and no one will take the trouble to press me very much to stop, unless it's old Horace," he murmured.

He went down the passage again, and emerged into the sunshine, at the same time as Mr. Hewitt had concluded his bargain with the Irish reapers, who had consented to his terms, and arranged to begin business next Monday. The owner of the Upland Farm was telling the Irishmen to get beer at his expense at the inn, and receiving many blessings for his consideration for their thirst, when Paul Essenden smote heavily on the shoulder of the elder man.

"To think that in all places upon earth I should have met with you here," he said.

The farmer shrank beneath the heartiness of the salutation, drew a deep, long breath, and stood, with a varying colour, looking at the man who had started up beside him as at an apparition which had scared him with its suddenness.

"I am very glad to see you; I hope you'll say the same to me."

They walked away from the Deeneford Inn to-

gether, out of ear-shot of the idlers there, and then Hewitt said slowly—

“ I am sorry that we have met, Paul.”

“ Why, how’s that ? ”

“ I came to this place as to a spot where it was impossible to meet any man or woman whom I had ever known. And, by God ! one by one marches towards me as though I had stood on a hill-top announcing my presence here by sound of trumpet.”

“ You did not wish to be known here ? ”

“ To be sure I did not.”

“ You are here under a feigned name ? ”

“ Or have taken up my right one—which you please.”

“ And you did not wish to see me, George : a man whom you have benefited, and who is glad, very glad, to be able to thank you on English ground for past kindnesses on the other side ? ”

“ I did not care to see anybody,” said Hewitt, sullenly still ; “ and you are about the last man whom I would have liked to meet under any circumstances, for you know me, and what I have been.”

“ What of it ? Do you think I would tell any one ? ” cried Paul Essenden indignantly.

“ There is no trusting any man.”

Especially such a fellow as I am,” said Paul,

shrugging his shoulders ; “ a man who might make a little money from your fears, and set scandal afloat concerning you. After all, the past life was an honest, up-hill fight, and in the face of fierce opposition you gained a position, and stuck to it. What is there to be ashamed of in that ? ”

“ Should I be thought any the better for it, Essenden ? ” asked Hewitt fiercely ; “ or would there be joy on earth, as well as in heaven, over my repentance—joy here in this meddlesome little village, too ? What a deal of human life you must have studied ! ”

“ You study it too much, and are too nervous in consequence.”

“ What will you take to go away ? ” said Hewitt bluntly ; “ I have money to spare, and will not flinch from your price. You were in Australia a straightforward fellow ; you worked with me as a labourer for three months, until I found out that you were a gentleman, by your very frankness and fairness ; deal fairly with me now, for the old times’ sake.”

“ Come, come, Hewitt—I’ll say Hewitt from this day,—the fair dealing must not be all on one side. You must deal fairly with me, and not have such a mean opinion of one who would go a long way out of his road to serve you, in return for your going

once a long way out of yours to serve him. In plain English, George, trust me."

George Hewitt looked into the face of the ne'er-do-weel, whose eyes did not flinch from the searching gaze bent upon them, and then stretched forth his hand.

"I trust you, Paul," he said, "though I wish we had not met—with all my soul I trust you."

"And when I make mischief, shoot me through the head," said Paul, laughing, "just as you shoot me through the feelings by your uncomplimentary remarks. Why, the sight of you has cheered me amazingly—you, the friend, the good adviser, the creditor who has not asked me yet what I did with the money he lent me. To you I can come when they at the great house think the very worst of me; and you—who have known what temptation is, and what I am—will not preach at me, but from that good heart of yours say something that will make me strong again."

"We are in England now. You are an Essenden and I—— Well, you know what I am, Paul."

"One of the best of fellows, whom I am not likely to shirk," cried Paul; "whom I am very likely to worry by incessant visits at his farm, when they turn on the gentility tap too strongly. After all, I am too much of the Bohemian to take to re-

spectable society ; and when they freeze me with their rules and ceremonies—even if they give me the chance of being frozen, of which I am not too sure—I shall steal across to the friend's house, and thaw myself at his fireside, if he will have me—if he will only try and get used to me.”

He looked almost wistfully towards the farmer, who said thoughtfully—

“ I shall be glad to see you—I think that I shall be glad to see you,” he added, with a reserve ; “ for you will be the one man to talk to with my mask off. And you will not see my past over my shoulder, Paul, but be that which I never was, and to which I have never aspired.”

“ What is that ? ”

“ A gentleman.”

“ That is about the last thing I am, they will tell you in Deeneford,” said Paul, laughing. And yet a very sad laugh it was, and did not light up his face much.

“ Oh, you have had your fling here, perhaps,” replied the farmer, “ but still it was the gentleman's wild spirits, and now they have worn themselves out, and only the gentleman remains. I respect those above me,” he said, with a grave humility, in which there was not the least affectation.

“ Well, it's a novelty for me to be respected,” re-

plied Paul, "and I shall make the most of the sensation while it lasts. I dare say that I shall not trouble any of you very long, for I don't feel settled exactly. You know my way."

"I remember it well," replied the other. "And now, how have you been getting on?"

"Badly," said Paul. "I have been steady enough, I have never been drunk or made myself a fool for five years; but I have not made money, and the best chances have slipped by me in the old style, and without my fretting at their loss."

"I am sorry——" began Hewitt, when he was interrupted by the other's laugh—a hearty and genuine one this time.

"What for? I have been happy enough; and I have earned sufficient to keep myself, and see the world—the great world—which is worth seeing, and which rich fogies, rusting in their arm-chairs, try to understand from books. I would not change places with my brother Horace—who's writing poetry still, I wager—for all the chances which Mrs. Martin's patronage has thrown in his way. I have missed him a little, but, barring that, George, mine has been a life that I don't regret. If I could settle down now, all the better for me, perhaps; but the restless fever has not quite worked out of me."

"You are soon tired of one life."

"I don't know that," he answered, more thoughtfully again. "It is when friends get tired of me that the love of change comes. I take the hint quietly, and go away."

"Not a bad plan."

"The best of plans, and satisfactory to everybody," he replied; "the—— Who is that dark-haired beauty at the gate, looking this way, all smiles at you?"

"My niece Eleanor—my adopted daughter, as it were."

"Oh, then you are not alone in the world any longer? That solitariness used to prey upon you, I fancied, in the great farm in Australia."

"No, not alone in the world any longer, happily."

"Well, George Hewitt, we shall meet again," said Paul, extending his hand.

"You will not come in now?" said Hewitt, hesitating before he made his offer, as though doubtful still of infringing the rule which he had adopted since his stay in Deeneford.

"No, thank you. I have the proprieties to face, and it's an ordeal which I shall be glad to get over."

He shook hands with George Hewitt, and departed. Uncle and niece stood watching him from the farm-house gate, as he sauntered along the road with his hands in his pockets once more.

"Who is that, uncle?" asked Nella curiously.

"Oh, that is another of them," he answered fretfully. "They are coming back one by one across my path; there's no stopping them. I give in."

"He is a friend?"

"He was a friend in the land where I made my money, and I took to the man, and liked him. He is Mr. Essenden's brother."

"Indeed! Ah, that is why the name of Essenden surprised you so much on the first night that we came home!"

"Yes, that is the reason. I saw the beginning of trouble ahead then. I expected this second meeting some day. Still," he said thoughtfully, "Paul is a fellow whom I can trust."

"I like his face better than his brother's, though it is not half so handsome."

"Why?" was the query put here.

"It is a frank face."

"Well, well; not a bad kind of fellow, Paul Essenden—not a good one either; a reckless fellow, loafing through life, seeing no object in it worth the striving for, and taking misfortunes with a grand composure in consequence; his own enemy, rather than other people's. I don't like such characters myself."

CHAPTER THE SEVENTH.

BROTHERS.

MEANWHILE, the man who was not a bad kind of fellow, nor a good one either, who was his own enemy rather than other people's, pursued his way towards Deeneford Hall at a pace less rapid than we have seen him entering Deeneford village.

He went doggedly but slowly towards the mansion, where the nature of his welcome was a trifle doubtful; and an attentive observer might have remarked that his pace was somewhat slower as he passed through the gates, and went along the carriage-drive towards the house. Still, he betrayed no nervousness of demeanour when he was close upon his aunt's establishment, and he went up the broad steps, and knocked at the door with an unfaltering hand. He was conscious that a disagreeable task might lay before him, but he was a philosopher who thought that the sooner it was over the better for everybody concerned. He would be glad to know on what footing he was to be received there, whether

the memory of his past follies rankled still in the mind of the proud woman whom he had offended and tired out.

A footman opened the door, and regarded Paul Essenden with a little curiosity, and not too much reverence. An unshaven, dusty traveller, he thought; harvest time, and valuable things in the hall which might be made off with—Mr. Horace's new hat, light overcoat, gold-mounted walking-stick amongst them.

"Is Mrs. Martin within?"

"Yes—sir," he added, after a moment's hesitation, as the inquirer looked him steadily in the face.

"Tell her that a gentleman wishes to see her."

"What name, sir? Have you a card?"

"Don't be in a hurry, Johnny,—and tell her, when she asks if the gentleman mentioned his name, that he said he was from Australia. Thirdly, and after a pause, you understand, that his name is Mr. Paul Essenden."

"Essenden, sir? Really!" exclaimed the servant.

"Will you step into the waiting-room?"

"Yes, I will."

Paul Essenden lounged into the waiting-room, took off his hat, ran his hands through his hair—and rich brown wavy hair it was—and then dropped

his hands into his pockets again, and took a deliberate survey of himself in the glass above the mantelpiece.

"I wonder what she'll think of you, Paul," he said, apostrophising his reflection in the glass; "whether her heart will sink much to think that the prodigal is returned and likely to be a nuisance in Deeneford? I dare say mine would if I were a starchy old lady, with grave notions of what was respectable; for what good, old fellow," nodding his head at his duplicate, "have you ever done, now?"

When the servant came in shortly afterwards, he was still studying the general effect of his appearance, and he did not change his position when he was informed that Mrs. Martin would see him in a minute.

"And how did the old lady take the news?" he asked, as he arranged his striped shirt-collar to his satisfaction.

"She was surprised, sir, but she got over it all of a sudden, and said she'd see you."

"Ah, that was kind of her, though she could not have said much less. By Jove," he added, putting his hand inside his waistcoat suddenly, "that's very queer, now. I thought it took more than this to excite Paul Essenden, and, after all, what the deuce

is there to be excited about? I don't want anything—I don't expect anything."

He turned and faced the footman.

"The minute is up. Lead the way, my friend."

"Mrs. Martin said she'd ring, sir."

"All right."

He seated himself on a couch that was there, and waited patiently for the summons, flipping one finger against another by way of accompaniment to the new tune that he had begun whistling softly to himself. Presently the bell rang, the servant reappeared, and he took up his great felt hat—more suitable for the head of a bagpiper from the Abruzzi than a quiet Englishman—and followed the lackey into the presence of his aunt.

She was seated alone in the great drawing-room, by one of the open windows, with her fancy work in her lap—a grey-faced, grey-haired lady, who was no longer disturbed by her elder nephew's advent. She looked up at him as he advanced, and held one hand towards him, which he shook very warmly in his own, although he did not detect much warmth of grasp in hers, or take much comfort to himself from the faint smile which flickered on her face.

"Well, aunt," he said, "back again, you see."

"Yes, Paul, I see," she answered. "Are you quite well?"

"Oh, I am never ill," he said; "always the same iron constitution, which no work or climate affects."

"And no dissipation either, perhaps?" she added, gravely and interrogatively.

He did not like this addendum, but he answered—

"Nothing hurts me. I come of the good stock of the Essendens."

"Yes, you should be grateful for the constitution which you have, and which has saved you when weaker men must have given way," she said. "Sit down, Paul."

Paul sat down, put his felt hat on his knees, and looked attentively at his aunt. Just such a meeting as he had anticipated—just such a woman as he had expected to confront, a cold, grave gentlewoman, neither glad nor sorry at his presence there.

"You have been away six years, I think?" she said, after a long pause.

"Yes, about that."

"Have you been doing well during that period?"

"Pretty well at times, very badly now and then—saving money, and losing it as luck came in my way or passed me by. At all events, aunt, getting my own living, and troubling no one in England for a shilling."

"You have troubled no one, certainly," said Mrs.

Martin. "I believe you have written one letter to Horace since you have been abroad?"

"Two, I think. Did he not get the other one?"

"He has received one letter, I know."

The man seemed discomfited for an instant, then said—

"I never was fond of writing letters at the best of times, and in the bush it's hard work. But I thought of you both none the less for that."

"You are aware, Paul, of the changes that have occurred since you were staying here with my poor boy?"

"Yes, I have heard of them. Horace wrote, and by a stroke of good luck his letter reached me. Ah, there was a second letter I sent to England then,—to be sure—with my congratulations."

"Congratulations at the loss of your cousin, or at the adoption of your brother Horace as my heir?"

"Not at the loss of my cousin, aunt. Ralph was a good fellow, and I was sorry."

"You were never deficient in feeling, although it was spasmodic and evanescent, Paul," said Mrs. Martin, softening a little after his last remark, "though one might as well have tried to impress the river beyond with a deep thought as you. Have you made money abroad?"

"A little," he replied evasively, "enough to keep

me for awhile—more than I know what to do with.”

“I am glad of that.”

“Yes, I thought you would be,” he said, “and that is why I have run over to see you all. For I should not have come had I been hard up, of course.”

“That is a proper spirit,” said the aunt; “though your poverty need not have kept you away if you had been an altered and a better man.”

He crumpled his felt hat between his hands in a nervous fashion, and said, at last—

“Exactly so.”

“You are altered, I hope, since you did your best—or rather your worst—to make your name a byword and a reproach here?”

“I don’t know that I did a great deal of harm, aunt, after all.”

“You have altered for the better, I hope?” said Mrs. Martin again.

“Well, yes,” was the slow answer; “I suppose I have. I don’t drink; and I’m sorry for many things that there is no recalling. But I’m not a model being, I’m running over with faults still. I like my own way; I acknowledge no one for master or mistress, and I jog on.”

Mrs. Martin sighed.

"No steadfastness of character—I could not look for that," she said; "your father, my poor brother, was weak enough, and Horace and you take after him."

"Steady old Horace is as strong as a horse. Where is he now—is he at home?"

"You can go up to his room directly; he returned last night from London."

"I'll surprise him, aunt, with your good leave, then."

"Yes, in a minute. How long a stay do you intend to make in Deeneford?"

"Well, that depends upon circumstances," he replied.

"Upon what circumstances?" was the calm inquiry.

"I'll tell you."

He drew his chair closer to that of his aunt's, and faced her with that steady, unfaltering look which appeared to be one of his attributes, as though he was not afraid of speaking the truth, for all his vacillation of character. It was a face that the aunt might have liked as well as Nella Carr then; and there was no guile in it, at all events.

"I shall wait here—or, rather, at the inn—till you are tired of me—till I read upon the face of the woman whom I have tormented so much in my day

that I am tormenting her again. I shall wait," he said, "till Horace finds me a bore; and the good Deeneford folk say that I have come back to fight for a share of the money which is going to my brother; then I pack up my box, and am off again, to the relief of my friends and myself."

Mrs. Martin looked down, as though his gaze had overpowered her.

"Proud, wilful, and independent as ever. I don't know that I am sorry for that, though you have no regard for my feelings," she murmured. "Still, the explanation is an open one, and it is as well that you should know that there is nothing to expect from me."

"Quite as well," he replied.

"I made my will a year or two ago, and as I am not fond of will-making, or of changing my mind in any way, why, all is arranged, so far as it is possible. I leave my money to Horace, who will marry in the spring."

"Horace deserves all your kindness, aunt—a deep-thinking, deep-feeling fellow he always was. I don't envy him his good fortune: if money be good fortune—for upon my honour I doubt it more and more."

"Money will always bring good fortune to those who know how to use it, and to do good with it."

"Ah, yes, that is an accomplishment I never excelled in. And as for doing good, why, the little good that I have ever tried to do has generally ended in harm. I don't know what makes me so unlucky a dog, but so it is, aunt."

"You have hinted to me what you have not come to Deeneford for, Paul; may I ask what really brings you here?"

"Well, it sounds like sentiment, but you know I haven't a scrap of it in my disposition: I wanted to see Horace; I wanted to see you."

She glanced at him, and had faith in his answer.

"I am glad to hear you confess that, for you know what a bad opinion I have had of you."

"Yes, and I deserved it. I don't know that I'm worth any one's good opinion now, though I have altered a little, and feel all the better for the alteration. Now may I go and see my brother?"

"Yes; and after that you will dine with us, Paul. Where can we send for your boxes?"

"I think of staying at the inn."

"You, a nephew of mine, at an inn!" cried Mrs. Martin.

"I shall be more independent—that is, I shall be less in the way, with my low tastes and my Australian manners, which don't suit everybody. I'd rather stay at the inn."

"I would prefer your remaining here," said Mrs. Martin decisively.

"Very well," he said; "but you must put up with all my eccentricities. I'm not a refined man; I hate refinement like poison."

"You are a gentleman when it is necessary, I presume."

"I haven't attempted that part lately," he replied; "and my idea of a gentleman may be very different from yours. But where is Horace?"

"In his study, as he calls it. It used to be Ralph's room."

"I know it."

"I will send——"

"Thank you—no," he said, interrupting her; "I'd rather surprise one who can bear a 'coup de théâtre' better than yourself. I want to see the rascal's big blue eyes—doll's eyes we used to call them—widen at the sight of me."

He rose and went away with the exultation of a boy who had an agreeable surprise in store for some one he loved. He left the great drawing-room, closed the door behind him softly, and went up the stairs like one who knew his way about the house upon which he had turned his back six years ago. Along the first landing he marched with a free step, as though he was more at home already, now that

he had seen his aunt, and found her gracious in her manner towards him, if not affectionate. He went to the extreme end of the corridor, and knocked softly on the panel of the door there—knocked a second time more loudly, when no response was given to his first appeal.

“Come in,” said a low voice, the voice of one absorbed in a task. Paul Essenden turned the handle of the door, and entered the room to find his brother bending over a writing-table. There was a long silence, and then Horace said, without looking up—

“Well, what is it?”

“If you please, sir,” said Paul, changing his voice to a feeble falsetto, “have you got a sixpence you can give a poor devil?”

“Eh—what!” and then Horace Essenden looked up, stared, gasped for breath, and rose slowly to his feet, with both hands extended, and with an unmistakable expression of delight at the recognition which he had made.

“It is—it is old Paul, by all that’s lucky!”

“By all that’s lucky, yes, old Horace,” said Paul, seizing his hands, and shaking them in his own. “This is worth a long journey, at least. How are you—how are you, lad?”

One might have smiled to see the heartiness of

the greeting, to have heard their simple laughs at one another, to have witnessed even a something swimming in both their eyes, which was not sentiment. Paul Essenden, at least, would have never owned to sentiment. Then they sat down and looked at each other, those two stalwart men, who were little more than boys when they said good-bye to one another last. They were not unlike each other in height and figure, only the figure of Horace was less round-shouldered, and the face was brighter, handsomer, and not weather-beaten.

"Well, Paul, you have not changed very much, though I doubt if I should have known you in the street."

"Oh, yes, you would, if you had not been dreaming along, after the old fashion. What's that,"—pointing to the manuscript on the desk,—“another poem, one more brilliant idea, or a letter?”

"A letter I am writing to a friend of mine," he said. "I have been in London, and have fallen in arrear with my correspondence in consequence."

"That's right, always answer your letters as soon as you can after you have received them. Who is it that says, 'A letter timely written is a rivet in the chain of affection?'"

"Why, you rascal—you villainous correspondent!"

cried Horace, taking a book from his library-table, and feigning to fling it at his brother.

"Ah, but our chain of affection does not want riveting, Horace," said Paul, "we understand each other far too well. Well, I have a whole heap of questions to put to you, and I hardly know where to begin. You did not answer any in your last letter; and you are as careless as I am, for all your good character. So you are going to be married in the spring?"

"Ah, my aunt told you that at once. Yes, she has made up her mind to it," he said thoughtfully.

"Married to the old flame that you used to rave about to me, asking my advice when you were jealous too? Don't you remember?"

"Yes, I remember."

"And now it is all settled at last; as it should be. *Vive l'amour*, Horace, and the deuce take all unfaithful ones in books or in life!"

"Don't say any more, Paul. Don't say anything about Miss Masdale to a living soul."

"Why not?"

"She is married already."

"Married! what, after——"

"Yes, after every promise."

"The confounded jilt!"

"No, not exactly. I will tell you all in a minute.

I wish that you would be silent now, Paul, and not worry me."

"My dear boy, why should I worry you?"

And then Paul Essenden regarded his brother with a pitying interest, and wondered how it had come to pass that so fair a love story had met with so unlooked-for a termination.

CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

A BROTHER'S CONFESSION.

PAUL ESSENDEN waited patiently for his brother's confession. He lay back in a rocking-chair that was handy there, crossed one leg over the other, put his hands in his pockets again, and looked rather more round-shouldered than ever. He was curious concerning the story, but not greatly excited—not one half so excited as his more sensitive brother, which, however, was natural enough, for the tender passion had never troubled Paul a great deal, and he had taken things phlegmatically in his wanderings through life.

“Out with it, Horace,” he said, when he felt that his brother was not keeping his word or his time—“that is, if you think your confession good for anything.”

“I have not much to confess, Paul,” replied Horace, leaning with one elbow on his desk, and his tall figure lounging away from it in rather a lacka-

daisical pose ; "it's the old story. I was a boy when I used to tell you of my love for Laura Masdale, and of the desperate flirtation that there was between us—a flirtation kept in the background because we were sons of a poor gentleman, and the Masdales, though poor enough themselves, were anxious that Laura should marry well. That was the position, I think ?"

"Yes, I left you in that interesting position when I came from Wilton to this place to spend a few months with my cousin Ralph. I believe Aunt Martin intended to take me off the hands of our mother then, and start me in life, but I didn't behave myself. Curious failing of the elder brother, Horace—he never behaved himself."

"That was the position then," said Horace, too full of his own troubles to regard his brother's attentively, "and so it remained, for Laura was to wait until I gained a position for myself that was worth asking her to share. I had boy-dreams, Paul, of proving myself a genius, and startling the world in due course, and I had great faith in Laura waiting for me, and being strong enough to resist the unfair pressure which her scheming parents put upon her."

"And she married some one else after all ?" said Paul, anxious to arrive at the dénouement.

"Yes. Don't be in a hurry ; you were always in a terrible hurry to get to the end of everything, and I like telling my story my own way."

"Who has a right to insist upon your telling it in a different fashion ?" inquired Paul. "Not I, at all events. Go on, old fellow."

"If she had thrown me off when I was a boy it would not have mattered a great deal," continued Horace, "but this went on year after year, and I could have trusted in her word as in my own. I was a man pledged to her, and she knew it, and was waiting for me, as I thought. Well, eighteen months ago she married Theobald Gifford."

"What, the clergyman ? Why, he was married already."

"He was a widower ; rich, very rich, thanks to his first wife, not to his own abilities, for all his opinion of them. I thought I liked him till that day—now, in my heart, I hate him."

"Why, I should have loved him very much myself."

"What for ?" asked the wondering Horace.

"For taking off my hands a woman who didn't know her own mind."

"She was dragged into that marriage ; it was all the fault of her scheming mother ; she had no more love for Gifford than she had for you, but the mar-

riage was forced upon her. Oh," he said bitterly, "it was an excellent match."

"And what has become of her?"

"She is within a quarter of a mile of here."

"Eh? the deuce!" said Paul, betraying more animation, and taking his hands from his pockets to set them on his knees. "That's bad."

"Why is it bad?"

"For a fellow like you in this unreal, morbid, melodramatic state."

"Do not be alarmed. I would not seek to do her harm for all the world, Paul; I'd rather die. Her husband was fool enough, a few weeks ago, to buy the living of Deeneford, and so he, his wife, and his baby, are within a stone's throw of us."

"I don't like it," said Paul, thoughtfully; "I see mischief ahead—nobody to blame, of course, but heaps of misconstruction, and the whole to conclude with a grand display of fireworks."

Horace struck his hand upon the desk indignantly.

"As flippant as ever, Paul," he cried, "never looking at things seriously, but turning everything into ridicule. I thought at least that you, my brother, would have sympathised with my position more. I have been longing to trust in some one, for I am awfully miserable, and my secret is too heavy for me."

"Well, I will not tell anybody," said Paul.
"How much does Aunt Martin know?"

"She knows that I am not in love with the woman whom I have asked to become my wife; but she insists upon my marriage none the less, for the sake of her whom I have deceived by my professions of attachment."

"A sort of 'serve-you-right' judgment," said Paul; "and the lady?"

"Is Augusta Gifford, the sister-in-law."

"What, the girl to whom you used to pay a little attention, in order to blind the good Wilton folk—the girl you rather liked, too; although more than one string to your bow was against the high principles of Horace Essenden? Why, man, she's too good for you, and you have made a lucky exchange."

"Yes, that is it," said Horace passionately. "She is too good for me, and I am a scoundrel to look her in the face, and let her think that I love her. Generous, trusting, and yet linked to such a fellow as I am. If it were not for the contract, I could get over all; I should be a better man, Paul."

"Well, then, break it."

"And offend my aunt?"

"Oh, hang the aunt!" he said irreverently.

"And ruin my prospects for life—those prospects which are very bright whilst I am in the sunshine

of Mrs. Martin's favour, but which become overclouded and presage my ruin when she turns against me."

"Yes, you're uncommonly stagey, Horace—you don't talk English; you are in a bad way, and no mistake."

"In my place, what would you do?" asked Horace sharply.

"What would I do? Ah, that's a different question; for they tell me I never act like other people. If I were really miserable, I should tell Miss Gifford, beg her pardon, and make a bolt of it—go a few thousand miles, and take to buffalo-hunting, or turn Mormon, or start a betting-book. At all events," he said, seeing his brother's white forehead contract ominously, "I would get rid of it by action."

"I am tied down to this place. I cannot leave Deeneford."

"Not with the aunt's permission, you mean; but then you would not have studied the aunt."

"And I cannot face ruin. I have been told that I am to be the heir of all this; and I respect Miss Gifford very highly. I——"

He paused, as his brother Paul laughed heartily at this.

"What is it now?" he asked.

"And, after all, you are not quite certain as to

the real state of your mind, your heart, your wishes. There, that is the fact, Horace; you are in a fog, and the little uncertainty about your future and your pretty romantic little miseries are all parts of your position, and not altogether unpleasant. Upon the whole, I dare say Mrs. Martin has given you the best advice, and knows what is best for you better than you or I."

"You must both think me a terribly weak man."

"I am a weak man myself," said Paul; "I have not been able to resist temptation, or to settle down to one good thing, and it is possible, just possible, that we are two weak fellows together. I have told you what I would do in a similar fix, if I were really in love with one woman and engaged to another. What you should do in your place is a different question. You should get Mrs. Gifford out of your mind—write her out—pray her out, if of a pious turn—or root her out—and then the rector's sister will be all the more lovable to you."

"Mine is a hard case," said Horace, with a heavy sigh. "You don't know all; you can't understand me."

"No, I'm blest if I can," answered Paul. "Yours is a mind diseased, and I can't minister to it; I should not like the job if I could."

"You have been in love, I suppose?"

"Upon my honour I don't think I have," answered

the brother. "The woman to my fancy has not appeared above the horizon. She must be very different to the rest of women—an earnest creature, whose firmness I can respect, and whose truthfulness I can admire—in fact, a woman with no nonsense about her; and that is an out-of-the-way woman, eh, Horace?"

"I wish I had your lightness of heart," said his brother, "I should be happy now."

"Mine is a poor philosophy."

"But it carries you through the world. Nothing daunts you; disappointments don't affect you; everybody is alike—you turn the same face to the hundreds whom you meet, and you part with them without a heart-pang."

"That is, I'm a cold-blooded animal, like a cat. Thank you, Horace; very neatly summed up."

"But I can't do this," continued the younger brother; "I am terribly impressionable—everything affects me seriously. I try to do my best and act my best, and I suffer."

"That is, you're a warm-blooded animal, like an Irishman, exactly. I left you, six years ago, fretting and fuming about fifty things, and I find you still boiling over with excitement. I think that the poetry you write has something to do with it. Leave it off, and try cricket."

"Upon my honour, Paul, you do me good," said the other, rising and walking up and down the room. "You brush the cobwebs off me; and I have had no one to trust in; a very lucky man, they tell me, but with not a friend in whom I could confide. I am thankful you're back again, for all your mocking tongue and want of sentiment. You are the better man of the two, and should be in my place whilst I go wandering. I am the scapegrace and the rascal at heart, not you."

"Oh! that is what they think of me at Deene-ford, then. Perhaps they are not far out. I never did a good action in my life, and I never thanked anybody else for one. Subject dismissed, Horace, pro tem."

"No; dismissed for ever. I'll say no more of this."

"Not till to-morrow, perhaps, and then a turn of the slide, and a new phase of your affliction."

"You stay here, of course?"

"That is what our worthy aunt says; and I," he added with a sigh, "should have been so much more happy at the inn."

"Why?"

"I should have been the master there, have given my orders in a loud voice, and been attended to. I could have gone out at any hour of the day or night without anybody asking me where I was going, and

I could have returned without any questions as to where I had been. I could have sat at my window, smoking a short pipe, and taken my dinner in my shirt-sleeves when the weather was sultry. I should not have been tied to one rule of your highly-starched, priggish English society."

"You shall be as free as you like, Paul," said Horace; "a thorough Bohemian, with no one to stand in your way. But remain with me; I haven't seen much of you yet."

He put both hands upon his brother's shoulders, and looked him earnestly, even affectionately, in the face. Six years ago these two men had loved each other very much.

"All right, Horace, I'm a fixture, aunt Martin permitting."

"She will take to you—she will understand you now."

"Oh, she knows very well that I am no better than I should be."

"She has seen your indifference, and been pained by your levity and obstinacy; but she has not seen yet the true Paul Essenden. I have fought your battles in vain, with you away, and apparently forgetful of us all."

"Perhaps I shall cut you out of the old lady's will in good time," said Paul drily.

"Try all you can—try for your fair share at any rate, and I'll never be jealous of you."

"I wouldn't toady the old girl for fifty times her money. I have been the happiest and jolliest of dogs, Horace, without a sixpence in my pocket. I say," with a grave look, "there's no dressing for dinner, I hope?"

"Not as a rule. That is, no dress-coats and white ties, when company is not expected."

"I'm glad of that. I should have stood it one day—borrowed one of your swallow-tails, and done the decorous; but in the list of 'Missing' the next, you would have found the name of Paul Essenden. And company don't come very often?"

"No."

"That's well. For company to your tastes, and to aunt Martin's, wouldn't do for me. I have a habit of speaking out, and it is sure to offend polite people, and when they offend me I am sure to swear at them. Is this jacket very much frayed at the elbows?"

"It is rather a disreputable jacket, Paul."

"I always feel at home in it. I can talk freely, breathe freely in it," he said, "and I hate other people's wardrobes. It'll do, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, for to-night," said Horace.

"I dare say my box—and a big seaman's chest it

is—will turn up to-morrow, or some day in the week, and then I'll astonish you. Let me see, where on earth did I leave that box last? and where did I tell them to send it? It won't do to lose it altogether, I suppose."

They went down to dinner shortly afterwards, and Paul Essenden scowled for an instant at the footman in attendance—the one sign of the gentility which he professed to abhor. His aunt took the head of the table, his brother the foot, and he sat by the side of his aunt and tried to feel at home in the old place, which in times past he had helped to turn out of window. He tried his hardest, he knew, but he was not at home yet, and once he wished himself at the inn, where he had ordered a bed for the night, and more than once at the Upland Farm, with rough, plain-spoken George Hewitt. He was uncomfortable. He had almost forgotten table etiquette, for he had not sat down to dinner "en regle" since he had marched himself out of that house, poor and independent, six years ago. Perhaps he should get used to it, he thought, and when dinner was over, and Mrs. Martin had left Horace and himself over the wine for awhile, he began to believe in settling down at Deeneford, aunt Martin permitting, as he had said in his brother's study at an earlier hour. There were no more rambling confessions of his

brother to listen to, but plenty of talk of old times at Wilton together, and many a laugh over past jests and mishaps.

When they joined their aunt in the drawing-room, Paul Essenden was at his best, and though it was early times to judge, Mrs. Martin in her heart thought that her elder nephew had wondrously improved. He spoke of his travels and adventures with a rough eloquence and a zest which pleased her; and the contrast which she mentally drew between him and his polished, conventional brother, was not wholly to his discredit. The first day was at least a success, and when he shook hands with his aunt, and bade her good-night at the early hour of nine o'clock, he fancied that the little withered hand of the gentlewoman lay less fishily in his than it had done when he first stepped into her presence.

"Is that the finis to the evening, Horace?" he asked, when Mrs. Martin had withdrawn.

"Yes. We are expected to be in our beds within a quarter of an hour of this time."

"Early hours will kill me. I never had a liking for them, and they are absolutely unbearable now," said Paul. "After all, it would have been better to have taken mine ease at my inn. Are you really going to bed?"

"I am going to write, I hope—I have promised a

poem for a new monthly, but if the rhyme lacks fire, I shall turn in."

"That is a hint not to disturb you for the rest of the evening. Well, I am always a capital fellow to take a hint," Paul replied. "Pass over the tobacco-jar, and leave me to myself 'till daylight doth appear.'"

"I never smoke tobacco, Paul," said Horace, with a perceptible shudder at the short clay pipe which his brother produced from his side pocket at this juncture, "but I have some excellent cigars—some of the true brand."

"I hate cigars, but give me a dozen, lad."

"You will not smoke them all?"

"I very much doubt if I shall smoke one," said Paul, turning over the cigars contemptuously in his hand. "There's something too fine about them to my taste. Good-night."

"Good-night. And—oh—you'll smoke out of window, Paul, lest the old lady wake up, and think the house is on fire."

"Or that my bad habits are cropping up one by one," said Paul, laughing. "All right, good-night."

The brothers shook hands, and went to their separate rooms, Paul to one which he had occupied during his last stay at the Hall, and which his aunt

had told him that evening she had given orders should be prepared for him again.

Here he found a candle burning in a silver candlestick, and the light showed him that his room was very little changed.

"So the old times come back. How near they seem!" he muttered. Then he leaned against the drawers, and pocketed his hands once more. The clock in the tower of Deeneford church chimed a quarter past nine whilst he was thinking, and he raised his head to listen, and laughed at the early and unreasonable hour at which he had been told to go to bed.

"No; this won't do," he said, flinging up the window, and leaning his arms on the sill. "I'm afraid this won't do for me. Too many rules, too much order and regularity for a disorderly and irregular fellow. Well, I have seen them both, shown the old lady that I bear her no ill-will, and am sorry for my past follies; and that being done, I can always drop from this window on to the flower-bed, and, without the fuss of parting, take myself off."

He looked down at the flower-bed which was below his window, and which divided the carriage-drive from the front of the house, where his room was situated. Everything had its reminiscence with him, for another laugh at his own folly escaped him.

It was from this window he used to drop when he was an agile stripling, and return at any time that suited with his inclination, clambering up the trellis-work on which the roses grew all summer-time—stout trellis-work, and none of your laths nailed together, and painted green.

One idea suggested another to this restless being, for he muttered to himself the instant afterwards—

“I wonder if the farmer has gone to bed. He kept late hours once, and smoked tobacco as hard as any man. I can’t take to those infernal things,” and he looked back savagely at the cigars which his brother had given him.

He leaned on the sill and thought for a little while longer; he looked up at the stars shining peacefully above him, he whistled a few bars of a song, he went back and inspected the cigars on the table again; finally, he extinguished the light and returned to the window.

“It’s impossible for a rational and reflective being to retire to rest at a quarter past nine in the evening, without his pipe, too, faithful friend and inseparable companion for the last three months as it has been. By Jove, I never intended to go in for so complete a reformation as that, however much I wished to make it up with the old lady before she died. I’ll stroll round to the farm, have a quiet half-hour with its

proprietor, and borrow some of his tobacco. Here goes."

He clambered through the opening, drew down the window after him, and sat for a moment complacently on the sill, swinging his long legs carelessly to and fro—a sight to amaze his respectable aunt, had she been looking up at her establishment on that particular evening.

"I suppose that they're as honest as they used to be about here," he said; "slow-going places like Deeneford never change."

He lowered himself to his full length, and dropped, alighting on his feet easily and gracefully, like a man who had been handy with his limbs all his life—sailor, bushman, shepherd, and vagabond as he had been by turns.

"Ah, this is better than that old-fashioned little crib," he said, drawing a long breath of relief; "here a fellow can breathe again."

CHAPTER THE NINTH.

THE OLD DAYS DRAWING NEARER.

WHEN he was in the high-road, Paul Essenden went on at his usual pace and in his usual manner—taking long strides, whistling plaintively, and keeping his hands in his pockets, where he jingled together the few shillings that he had, as though their sound was music to his ears. At the turn of the road, where a second road branched away from the first and went towards the Upland Farm, he came suddenly to a full stop, and left off whistling.

The farm was in sight as he halted under some heavy trees hanging over the oaken palings which fenced in his aunt's estate; there was a light in the lattice-window near the entrance door, and a something between him and the light, that was like the figure of a woman, watching there attentively; lost from those within by the dark background, but visible plainly enough, and a startling figure enough, to an observer from the point where Essenden stood.

“Now what is the meaning of that little game?”

said Paul to himself, and then he advanced once more swiftly and silently, as though he had practised that art of the Australian aborigines. "Who watches honest George, who has no right to be watched any longer? A tramp, I suppose. I'm afraid that I shall scare her very much."

He took his hands from his pockets when he was close upon the woman, whom he found standing on tiptoe in her eagerness to peer more completely into the room. He looked over her shoulder first, to see the object of her interest, and saw his old Australian friend sitting quietly in a corner of the room, smoking his after-supper pipe, as he had fancied he should find him, and staring at the empty fire-grate with great intentness. Having satisfied his curiosity in this direction, he regarded the woman at his side for a moment before making her aware that she had a watcher in her turn.

She was a woman whose age it was difficult to guess, her face being very dirty, and her hair trailing from under her bonnet, and hanging about that face like a mask. A woman who was very poor, her shawl and dress patched and torn in many places, and who was either weak or tired, or both, she sighed so heavily with every minute that she lingered there.

He spoke at last, and startled her as much as he

had expected, for she swung herself round from the window, and backed against the wall in her astonishment.

"When you have quite done blocking up the way, my good woman, I should like a peep myself."

"I—I was on'y looking for a minnit," answered a sullen voice at last. "There's no harm in looking. A cat may look, I s'pose."

"Oh, yes, at a king, they say, but it's exceedingly disloyal for all that. May I ask what you see in my friend Mr. Hewitt to admire so much?"

"It is Hewitt, then. That's the name—I was sure on it—that's the name he went by last, and to which he sticks still."

"Has he another name, then?" asked Paul Es-senden coolly.

"Never you mind; p'raps he has, p'raps he hasn't," said the woman. "I was a-coming here to beg some milk for my young un," she said, hugging something under her shawl that Paul had thought till then was a small bundle of rags she carried, "but I'd rather die now than ask it on him."

"Don't you like him?"

"Not at all. And yet he warn't bad in his way to me—quite the tother; but I shouldn't care to face him. He's a hard un, and a deep un. I wouldn't

say, with all his goodness, that he'd mind cutting my throat much."

"You have not a great deal of faith in Mr. Hewitt, though why he should want to cut your throat I don't see, although you would find yourself more comfortable out of the world than in it, after that little operation had been performed."

"I know that without your palaver," said the woman bluntly.

"You are poor, unfortunate, driven clean into a corner—the old story."

"What of that? Will you help me?"

"I have been poor, unfortunate, and driven clean into a corner myself half-a-dozen times," said Paul; "of course I will. I am a poor devil now for that matter."

"Why don't your friend help you?" she said, with a meaning gesture towards the window.

"So he would if I were to ask him, for he's a good fellow."

"Is he?" said the woman thoughtfully; "and where's the gal—Nella—the one he fetched away from the Joiner's Arms? Don't say she's dead, please, all at once."

"He has a niece living with him—Eleanor."

"Nella we used to call her. I'm glad on it. Strike me dead here—babby and all—but I'm glad

on it. How odd—what fun to drop upon 'em like this," she cried, with an hysterical little laugh, "and they never the wiser! I s'pose she's gone to bed, like the good un that she is, and never dreamt of the likes of me outside."

"Don't you think you had better go away now?"

"Oh, I'm a-going," said the woman, with a scowl, as she hitched her baby higher in her arms before making a start forwards. "I won't hurt anybody's feelings; it's not my way to spile anybody's game. I've stuck to my pals longer than they ever stuck to me, gord knows. What are you a-follerin' me for?"

"I'm going to shut the gate after you, that's all."

"How perlite we is," said the woman ironically.

"Where shall you stop to-night?" asked Paul.

"A long way from here—this aint the village that will suit me."

"You are tired already."

"I should say I was—so would you be if you'd walked as fur."

"Perhaps I have, for I've been on the tramp all day. Here's money, girl, or woman, or whatever you are; and if you go to the first inn on the right, and ask them in Paul Essenden's name to let you sleep somewhere till the morning, they'll find a place for you and your child, I fancy."

"You're not a bad sort," said the woman, as she took the money from him.

"Yes, I am—a very bad sort."

"No, you aint. Bad sorts don't fling their money away on tramps like me," she answered. "And you're his friend then?"

"Yes."

"An old friend?"

"Yes, an old friend."

"Been across the herring-pond, I s'pose? Met him there, p'raps?"

"Yes," answered Paul again.

"What school was yourn, now?"

Paul laughed. He understood the woman, but he did not take offence at her questioning, or at her opinion of him.

"Oh, Martin's School."

"I never heerd tell of Martin's. It wasn't a London lot?"

"No; a country."

"Ah, that's werry different," said the woman disparagingly; "and though I've dropped the kit of 'em, I must say the London ones air best and safest. But what are you all a-hanging about here for? Have you repented too, like the rest on 'em?"

"A little; not quite."

"He's a fool to take up with any of his old gang, mind you," said she; "he puts himself too much into other chaps' power, and is not so downy a blade as I gave him credit for—not by a long chalk, I should say. Will you take a message to that place for me?"

"With pleasure."

"Tell him and her that Sally dropped upon 'em here, and wouldn't frighten 'em by coming in to give 'em how-d'ye-do. That I wasn't spectacle enuf for 'em, and so knew my place. And tell her—Nella, yer know—that though I should have liked to see her agin werry much, I went away for her blessed sake, as I did in Joiner's Lane, not sorry for her luck, and wishing it to last—upon my soul, and wishing it to last."

She went on at a faster pace after delivering her message, and did not look back at him to whom she had entrusted it. She was lame and footsore, but she dragged her way onwards with rapidity, as though anxious to escape from the better atmosphere in which Nella Carr lived, and doubtful if her presence might not pollute it, lingering there.

Paul Essenden watched her for awhile; then turned back towards the farm, wondering a little at the relationship which had existed between that fragment of humanity and the Hewitts.

Fragment of our poor humanity, drifting further out to sea with every tide, and only that frail spar within her arms to cling to, and keep her womanly. Uncle and niece saw this life for her—and only this life—years ago, when they bade her good-bye in Westminster. If George Hewitt had tried to save her then, it would have been better for his peace of mind in Deeneford ; it would have altered his whole life as well as hers.

CHAPTER THE TENTH.

MR. HEWITT'S TROUBLES BEGIN.

WHEN Paul Essenden went back to the farm-house, he found Mr. Hewitt standing under the porch, with the front door open behind him.

"What is it? Who is it?" were the sharp questions hurled forth, and "A friend—Paul Essenden," were the replies.

"It seems like the old times to challenge and be challenged thus, George," said Paul, when he was close upon his friend.

"I heard voices, and could not account for the noise at the end of my front garden, unless the harvesters had got quarrelling outside. Is there any news?"

"You have grown nervous, Hewitt, since we met in the bush, where you took pity on me, and led me to your home. Is there anything to fear?"

"No; nothing to fear," was the reply. "No one has a right to taunt me with what I have been. But she," dropping his voice to a whisper,

"does not know this, Paul—must never know all the truth, and so lose all respect for me at once."

"It's as well to sink the past, when the past is not complimentary," said Paul thoughtfully, "and when it lies in our power to make the future much better. I have come to have a quiet half-hour's chat with you, and to borrow your tobacco."

"Enter—you are welcome," said Hewitt; "but the less noise the better, for she sleeps lightly."

"I would not wake her for the world," replied Paul, entering the house.

"She was up early this morning. It has been a busy day with us, and the forerunner of days still more busy, as we begin harvesting on Monday. Sometimes I fancy that she is too energetic for her strength, too anxious to be bustling about and of use to me. If she was to die and leave me all alone here!"

"You are deeply attached to your niece."

"Yes; I ought to be, she is a good girl."

The two men sat down, and Hewitt passed over his tobacco-jar to Paul, who filled his short pipe and lighted it.

"Who was that woman to whom you were talking just now?" the farmer asked.

"A woman whom I found watching you through that window."

"Watching me," exclaimed Hewitt. "What kind of woman was she?"

"A poor woman, almost dead-beat with a long tramp, and a baby to carry. She was coming to beg for milk for the child, when she caught sight of you, recognised you, and would approach no nearer."

"Knew me?" he repeated.

Paul Essenden nodded an assent to his inquiry.

"One more advancing—how the old faces are hemming me in! What does it mean—why cannot I rest?"

"Yes, you are not as strong as you used to be," said Paul reflectively. "A trifle seems to upset you in old England. In Australia, you were a man of iron, fearful of nothing, disguising nothing—rather proud, in fact, of what you had risen from."

"I had only myself to study then," he said. "Did you ask the woman's name?"

"She mentioned her Christian name only—Sally."

"Sally—what Sally can that be?" he said thoughtfully.

"Perhaps you will be able to guess in a minute," continued Paul, "for she bade me deliver this message to your niece. 'Tell Nella,' she said, 'that

though I should have liked to see her very much, I went away for her blessed sake, as I did in Joiner's Lane, not sorry for her luck, and wishing it to last.' That is as near as I can recollect, and I fancy that it is almost word for word."

"I know who it is now," said Hewitt, with a groan. "I wish she had died by the road-side like a dog, rather than have found me out."

"She is going away, she says. Do you not believe in her word?"

"No, Paul, I don't. She will come again; at some time or other I shall see her; a chance word will escape her, and the rest will come, marching upon us, a grim army, that there will be no resisting."

"She has known your niece, then?"

"Don't put any more questions to me. My niece is a lady, you will see that presently, and this out-cast is nothing to her. But she knows what I have been, Paul, and she can let everybody else know."

"No one has a right, you say, to taunt you with the by-gones."

"But then she will know it—this girl who looks up to me, loves me, and believes me all that is good."

He dashed his pipe into the fireplace, where it shivered to fragments; he rose to his feet, took his

hat from behind the door, where it had been suspended on a peg, and pulled it fiercely over his brows.

“Where are you going now?”

“To find this woman. I cannot rest till I have found her, spoken to her, warned her of the danger that there is in mentioning my name to any of her tribe.”

“I’ll go with you,” said Paul, rising. “I see that there is no chance of a quiet pipe to-night, for all my efforts to secure it. Besides, I don’t like your looks.”

“Is there murder in them, Paul?” he asked, with a short, hard laugh.

“Not quite so villainous an expression as that,” said Paul coolly. “But you want a friend with you—here I am.”

They went quietly out of the farm-house, George Hewitt closing the door noiselessly behind him, and dropping the key into his pocket. They proceeded down the road to the village, which was silent and deserted enough, the one sign of life and light being at the inn, into which they walked. Here a few inquiries were made, and here was elicited the one fact that the woman had called there, asked for milk for the baby, and bought a glass of ale and a biscuit for herself; inquired the way and the distance to

the next village, and then departed without delivering the message to the landlady which Paul Essenden had given her. They went from the inn into the high-road, where Mr. Hewitt stood meditating for awhile.

"She has not gone on to the next village; it is seven miles distant, and you say that she is dead-beat. In the morning she will come for money, and then I must tell her what she risks in facing me."

They walked back towards the road which divided the farm-house from the Hall.

"I will not ask you in again," said Hewitt. "I am not myself to-night, and altogether bad company. You'll not mind?"

"Mind, no. But I shall look you up very often, for I don't like life at the Hall, and you are an old friend."

"You are very kind to say so," said Hewitt, humbly and gratefully. "But we are in England now, where a man loses caste or gains credit according to his choice of acquaintances."

"You will forget that I owe my life to you."

"That was a mere accident. You would have done as much for me."

"And though that life was a valueless kind of affair, and nobody would have grieved a great deal if I had lost it, I am still your debtor, George. I have

no caste to lose—it is gone already—and I have no credit to gain.”

“All this is very well until I am found out,” said Hewitt.

“Till that time comes, then, we will not discuss the question further. Good-night.”

They shook hands together warmly, and parted. Hewitt went slowly homewards thinking of Paul Essenden.

- “He means well, but what good can he do, and what harm may not follow my acquaintance with him? All around me is very misty, and I must get away for Nella’s sake.”

He opened the door and went softly into the house, locking up behind him. He entered the parlour, hung his hat behind the door once more, and took up the light which he had left burning on the table.

“Perhaps Paul is right,” he muttered to himself, “and I am growing unnecessarily nervous—I who never knew what it was to fear once; but then I had only myself to care for, not this girl whom I have saved from destruction.”

He went up-stairs and paused outside the first door, which was ajar.

“She is careless; she should always lock her door,” he said. “I wonder if she is asleep? If she

is awake I will tell her what to say to Sally when the woman comes back, as she will. Nella," he called, in a low voice.

There was no answer, but the stillness within the room did not appear to satisfy him—on the contrary, to arouse his fears. Yes, he was a man whose nerves had grown weaker since he had taken to farming down in Deeneford. He listened for her breathing, and then, hearing nothing to assure him that she slept, he pushed open the door, and held the light above his head as he peered into the shadows beyond.

It was a large room, with an old-fashioned four-post bedstead in the distance, between him and the lattice window. He could have seen her sleeping from the door, but the bed had not been occupied that night.

"Nella," he said, walking slowly into the room, "I thought that you had been asleep for hours."

He uttered these words to assure himself that there was nothing new and strange to bewilder him, but he scarcely expected to find her in that room. And he was right—she was not there.

END OF VOL. I.

